

*Church Words*  
*A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE*  
*Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga*  
*March 22, 2009*

*HYMN: Chant for the Seasons [Spring]*

GREETINGS

**MADDIE.** Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted. Please note the emergency exit over here to my right, now is the time to put your cell phone in “Worship Mode,” and childcare for the young and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery.

If you have a particular joy or sorrow or something you’d like added to the **prayer of the people**, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

In the fellowship area, there is a **silver box** and I encourage you to use that to answer the survey that was in the newsletter. It’s important that we hear from as many people as possible, so your help is appreciated.

**Our budget for next year** is \$154,235. We need your pledge to help us reach this modest goal. Please pick up a pledge card today from Daidee Springer or Bill Berry. Bill and Daidee will be glad to answer any questions you might have about the budget or your commitment.

A complete listing of announcements is included with the bulletin and is available on our web site. The best way to find out what’s going on around here is to **sign up for a weekly e-mail**. To do that, please see Chris in the office.

Today, we are pleased to welcome Tiffany Envid to our sanctuary and she begins with a traditional song, “Amazing Grace.”

*PRELUDE: Amazing Grace*

*LIGHTING THE CHALICE*

In the light of truth and the warmth of love,  
we gather to seek, to sustain, and to share.

*STORY: Art is for Everyone*

Can you tell me what art is?

Do you know good art? Or bad art?

How about these paintings? Good or bad?

Once upon a time on the island of Meddybemps, Margaret came home from school with a drawing in her hand and very big tears in her eyes. She had drawn a picture of Tippetty Witchet’s windmill house and a boy had made fun of it. Tippetty Witchet was a neighbor of Margaret and a sorcerer.

“He said it was awful. He said I would never be an artist.” She made a very sad face.

“I’m sorry, Margaret”, said her Mother. “He was wrong. This is a good drawing.”

“You have to say that. You’re my Mom,” sniffed Margaret.

“But it is good, Sweetie”, said her Mother. “Why don’t we show it to Tippetty Witchet and see what she thinks.”

Margaret and her Mother rode their bicycles to Tippity's house to show her the drawing.

Tippity Witchet looked at the picture and smiled her biggest smile. "What a lovely drawing, Margaret! You are a fine artist."

Margaret felt a little better. "It's a picture of your house," she said. "A boy at school said it was awful."

"Stuff and Nonsense!" said Tippity. "Art is art. We all see things in different ways and we all find our own ways to show people what we see. I see my house and I like the way you've drawn it."

"With lots of practice, some people develop great skill at drawing or painting, but that doesn't mean their artwork is any better than yours. Everybody is different and Art is for Everybody."

"I know what. Hold hands. I'll show you what I mean." They all held hands and Tippity waved her magic wand around in the air.

In the time it takes to wink your eye, Tippity, Margaret, and her Mom disappeared from the windmill house and appeared near the fishing boats at a village by the sea.

Here they found a man sitting on a little bench. He was drawing a picture of two fishermen who were working on their boat.

Tippity whispered, "This is my friend, Uncle Dot. He paints lovely watercolor paintings."

Uncle Dot heard her and turned to greet them. "Hello, ladies," he said.

Tippity Witchet introduced Margaret and her Mother to Uncle Dot and showed him Margaret's drawing.

"Well, this is nice!" Uncle Dot studied the drawing and said, "I like the way you showed all the flowers in Tippity's garden, and that's a very cheerful sun in the sky. Art is such great fun, isn't it?"

Everyone agreed that it was.

"Look here," said Uncle Dot. "Why don't all of you sit down and draw or paint with me for a while? I have lots of art supplies. Use whatever you like."

Margaret's Mother said "Oh, I can't draw well at all, but the rest of you, please go ahead. I'll watch."

"Nonsense!" said Tippity as she found some colored pencils. "Of course you can. I'm going to use pencils myself. Margaret, what would you like?"

Margaret chose markers and her Mother picked out a few bits of colored chalk, something she liked to draw with when she was a child. In no time, everyone was busy drawing and painting.

People stopped by to see how they were doing and said nice things about their work. The artists listened to sounds of seagulls overhead and the creaks and thunks of the boats rocking on gentle waves. They smelled ropes and nets and fish and the sea itself. They were having a splendid time.

Later in the afternoon, the smells of suppers being cooked in nearby houses made the artists hungry so they agreed to stop for the day. They tacked their art onto an old board and stepped back to see what each other had done.

Each piece was different. Everyone had seen the same things: a boat, fishermen, the sea and sky and sun. But each person drew or painted those things in his or her own way.

“Delightful!” said Tippity. “They’re all very interesting.”

“This was great fun!” said Margaret’s Mother.

“See? You are all artists!” said Uncle Dot.

“Yes, we are,” said Margaret, proudly. She held her Mother’s hand.

“Yes, we are.”

And this is Margaret’s art.

And this is what her mother created.

This is what Tippity Witchet drew.

And this is the watercolor by Uncle Dot.

From that day on, Margaret and her Mother enjoyed drawing and painting and all kinds of art. They didn’t care if anyone thought their work was good or not because they knew that didn’t matter at all. Because art is for everyone.

*CHILDREN’S RECEPTIONAL*

We hold you in our love as you go, as you go  
May your heart be at peace as you go  
To nurture the spark of your precious life  
We hold you in our love as you go.

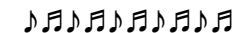
*OFFERTORY: “Grace Flows Down”*

I’ll bet you know John Lennon. He was born in 1940 and die in 1980. He was British singer and composer, and a founding member of The Beatles.

He is remembered mostly for his music, and for stating, in 1966, that The Beatles were more popular than Jesus Christ. And indeed they were, although many people were scandalized at the time. He is less well known for an even more scandalous remark about the British Royalty. At a performance in England at which members of the Royal Family were in attendance, John asked fans to clap their hands in time with the music. Looking to the royal box, he said, “Those upstairs, just rattle your jewelry.”

We’ll collect the offering now, for the support and ministry of this church and here in America, we are all royals and all commoners alike. No need to rattle your jewelry, and no need to clap in time to the music. But if you feel the need to applaud, the way to do that is support the church generously. If you write a check for your annual pledge, please mark it that way.

As always, the Wood–Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non–perishable food and household items for the Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. And thank you very much for your generosity. If you wish to light a personal candle of joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Mary will assist you.



Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience today. Would that we recognize our blessings every day and be thankful for them. Christina, please lead us in our Hymn of Thanksgiving.

*HYMN OF THANKSGIVING*

Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day,  
For all gathered here, and those far away,  
For this time we share, with love and care,  
Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day

ORISON

*Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.*

Buck O'Rear appears to be mending well after surgery on his left wrist and right shoulder. He's still at Siskin, but he might go home this week. Leslie has been with him through this ordeal and she said that after he gets home, she could use a break now and then. So if you can help out, please give her a call.

Wendy Sapp and Anthony Henry express their gratitude for your expressions of support after the death of their son. Please keep them in your prayers.

Thou, which are everywhere,  
Many are your names.  
May we always feel your presence,  
May your wisdom guide us,  
In our deeds as well as in our dreams.  
May we have what sustains our body and soul;  
Lead us first to forgive the mistakes of others  
Even as we hope our own mistakes will soon be forgiven.  
May we resist the temptation of the quick and easy,  
And be delivered from that which demeans and destroys life.

May we live purposefully and joyfully  
in every moment,  
in every encounter,  
now, and in the time to come.

In these few moments of silence, let us remember those who suffer the fallout of war, but today, perhaps, close to our heart, let us hold the hearts of those who suffer the loss of loved ones.

*Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.*

RESPONSE

When our heart is in a holy place  
When our heart is in a holy place  
We are blessed with love and amazing grace  
When our heart is in a holy place

*SERMON: Church Words*

You know the Oxford English Dictionary? It contains all, or nearly all of the words in the English language, obsolete or current, from the first records of the language in the 8<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. According to the publishers, it would take a person 120 years to type the 59 million words of the dictionary, 60 years to proofread it, and 540 megabytes to electronically store it.

Today, it contains more than 300,000 main entries. In addition there are about 157,000 combinations and derivatives; 169,000 phrases, 137,000 pronunciations; 249,300 etymologies; 577,000 cross-references; and 2,412,400 usage quotations. The last complete print edition was published in 20 volumes in 1989 but it's updated all the time. You can buy it on one CD for \$295.00

It's comprehensive. But it's not complete. Ray is in the dictionary, and Solomon is, too. But Ray Solomon is not. Jeff Briere is not in there, either. The most comprehensive English dictionary in the world does not define people. Well, some people are defined, like Malcolm X and Mao Tse Tung. But for most of us, we'll have to define ourselves.

So, if you were to define yourself, you could start by saying that you are a human being, that you are a certain age, and your parents are so and so, and that you live in such a place, and that have these qualities, and you do that for a living, and your cat's name is Fluffy. And you

could say that you are American. Or Canadian. And that you speak English. Or French. Or whatever languages you speak.

Along with culture, language defines us more than anything else, because it determines the way we think. A French woman, raised in Paris thinks about the world in very different patterns from a Filipino raised in Manila. Language is not permanent, though, it's somewhat malleable. We can learn different words and different ways to use them; we can change our language, and with it, our way of thinking about the world.

This is important to understand this morning as I develop some ideas about the words we use in church. This is the first of occasional sermons I will preach about church words.

Unitarians and Universalists were and are heretics. They were and are great nay-sayers. Historically, Unitarians denied the Trinity and Universalists denied the existence of Hell. And yet, they were always considered Christians up until about 1940.

After the Second World War, most Unitarian Universalist societies became infatuated with humanism and stopped using religious language, because it truly was not helpful to use church words in a society that was strongly humanist. My home church is a good example. It was founded as the First Universalist *Church* of Syracuse and after a beloved pastor died, it was renamed in his honor as the Betts Memorial *Church*. It is now the First Unitarian Universalist *Society* of Syracuse. The Lord's Prayer was part of every service until 1970. When I joined that church in 1992, the word God was rarely spoken.

The hymnal we now use, *Singing the Living Tradition*, is another example. It has a very strong humanist theme throughout. Architecture is another example. Any Unitarian Universalist church built before 1920 would be instantly recognizable as a church, and probably had a steeple and all that. Driving by, you might not

immediately recognize this building as a church. In this room though, you immediately sense a religious purpose, even if we take away all the furnishings. And the screen.

This is not unusual—the culture of a religious society will change over time to fit the needs of the people. And I think we should be aware of that change. The overly-humanist bent of Unitarian Universalist societies fostered a sort of memory hole, down which much religious language was lost. Lost, but not forgotten. The ideas and relationships were not lost, we just lost our ability to talk about them because we lost the words.

The President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Rev. Bill Sinkford, refers to a “language of reverence” when he suggests that Unitarian Universalists could recover their religious heritage. A “language of reverence.” The Rev. Kendyl Gibbons is probably the most prominent religious humanist minister in the Unitarian Universalist Association, and I want to bring you a few words from a recent sermon of hers.

She writes, “I believe that a religious tradition that does not help its members discover meaningful and satisfying ways of expressing human experience of reverence is missing a crucial and central piece of its function. We are not dealing in debate or persuasion here. We are talking about how we recognize and understand that unbidden, overwhelming awe at the wonder, magnificence, danger, demand, and delight of being alive.

“Some in the humanist community find traditional religious language so defiled by irrationality as to be deemed unusable. However, we can not invent a new vocabulary of reverence out of whole cloth. Such an arbitrary system, no matter how unobjectionable and even true its expressions, will not have the profound resonances of lifelong memory.

“There is nothing so petulant as to throw away what our ancestors

passed on to us, in stories and stones, in scriptures and songs, in rituals and prayers, because we think that we—in our adolescent hubris—know better now. Who can stand in the shadow of the great pyramids, or the radiant light and soaring stone of the cathedral at Chartres; who can listen to the deep cadences of the Book of Common Prayer and not realize that our wonder and our hunger and our terror are not ours alone, but echo down the ages of the whole human race?

“There is nothing incompatible with rediscovering traditional vocabularies of reverence and creating contemporary expressions of our own experience. Ideally, the two endeavors inform and enrich one another. We must, of course, struggle against a vocabulary trivialized by sentimental platitudes and cheap reassurances. We must not let our language of reverence be manipulated by power mongers who would ascribe the will of God to their own ambitions. Most of all, we must not succumb to the fettering literal-mindedness that afflicts us today no less than those who came before us. Rejecting religious language because we cannot believe it literally is just as constraining as using such language without thinking about it and without critique.”

*The words of Kendyl Gibbons.*

Let us recall here what religion is all about. The root meaning of the word is “re-binding” or re-connecting.” Religion has been described as “our response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.” Having religious experiences is inherent in human nature. Religious experiences include such qualities as having a sense of mystery, feeling the unity of all things, or having a deep sense of gratitude for life. Religion need not include a supernatural being, especially an old white male with a beard. Religion need not be theistic or even monotheistic, either.

Let us also recall why we go to church. We don’t go to church to primarily learn something—we can do that in the academic class-

room. We don’t go to church primarily to implement social change—public and social agencies with much more clout that we have can do that much more effectively. We don’t even go to church to drink coffee—Greyfriar’s and Stone Cup do coffee as well as we do.

People go to church to nurture their spirit, to give voice to hopes and despair, to connect with others in experiences beyond the psychological or the political. People go to church—we go to church—to seek personal transformation and to open and touch our own hearts and the hearts of others.

For too long, when religion in this country was considered, only one kind of religion—Christianity—was considered. And during the last twenty years, an arrogant and noxious style of Christianity. And so for me, a hugely important reason to claim a religious language, is that if I do not, they will, and other religions will be shunted to the margins.

I want to reclaim religious words for our worship service: Orison, an archaic word for prayer; in the pulpit is a preacher—not a speaker; and the preacher preaches a sermon—not a talk or a speech; we may begin with an invocation and end with a benediction—not opening and closing words.

There are other church words; words like atonement, salvation, sin, liturgy, blessing, grace and communion that I will address in this series of Church Words, but today I want to talk about the G-word. God.

How can we use that word and not refer only to an old white guy sitting on a throne in the clouds? How can Christians, humanists, Buddhists, atheists and agnostics and all the rest of us be happy with a reference to God? We need not be tied to the traditional meaning of that word; we can claim that word as our own with our own meaning. I use the word God freely, because when I talk about

matters of ultimate importance, there is no other word that carries the significance and weight that God does.

The root word of god predates the Romans and is found in a central Asian proto-language and it means to call or to invoke. A god, then, is the one invoked. It seems to me that you can think of God in one of several ways. Here come the *isms*:

1. God is God and the universe is the universe; they are separate and God made the universe and rules it. This is the traditional *theism* of Judaism, Islam and Christianity. In this iteration, God has a persona; God is male, alternately loving and wrathful, and demanding obedience to his laws. God intervenes in human affairs from time-to-time.

A subset of theism is *deism*, the idea that God created the universe, but doesn't have anything to do with it anymore. God set the universe to spin and left it alone. Many of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence and wrote the Constitution were deists.

2. God *is* everything and everything *is* God. People often express this idea as "God is Nature." In theology, this position is known as *pantheism*, God is all, all is God. In this iteration, God has no persona, can not intervene in human affairs and has no agency, no independent power to make things happen.

3. Everything is *in* God. In this iteration, the universe and God are not quite separate and not quite identical. They are related as blood is to the body. This position is known as *panentheism* in philosophical circles. Everything is God, *pantheism*; everything is in God, *panentheism*.

4. God, as defined by Christians, Muslims and Jews does not exist. This is *atheism*.

5. It's impossible to know if God, as defined by Christians, Muslims

and Jews exists. This is *agnosticism*.

Now, given those positions, how can we use the word God in a way that is useful to everyone? My humble suggestion is to focus on what God *does*, not who God *is*. Pay attention to the ways in which God is manifested in this world: The beauty of a sunset, the laughter of a child, the stillness of solitude, the sonority of Mozart, the cadence of Shakespeare, the vision of Picasso.

The beauty of this room. The connections you have with people. For me, God is expressed in relationships. The way I think of God is this: God brings people together to create something. A colleague said that to me once. If I were speaking with a Christian, I might refine it this way: God brings people together to create the kingdom of God on earth. Or God brings people together to create a better world.

My belief about God—and it is belief, because there's no proof—my belief about God changes. In grade school, God was an old white man in heaven who ruled the universe. And after high school, through college, the Army, family life, work and play, I continued to think about God that way. When I thought about God, which wasn't very often. I was unchurched for many years.

In theological school, I paid people to make me to think about God in a different way. And I did. My idea of God was first tickled by the phrase *the Ground of All Being*. That is an expression of Paul Tillich, a German Reformed theologian who taught at both Union Seminary in New York, and Harvard Divinity School. In that era Tillich was without theological peer. Dr. Tillich would not use personal words to talk about God, because the God he knew was so far beyond the categories of the personal that he found personal words offensively inadequate. So Tillich's definition of God is that God is not a Being, but the Ground or Source of All Being.

The glue that holds everything together is another way to express this

idea. It occurred to me last week that the title of the longest running soap opera might also express this idea. *The Guiding Light*. Or, when you are frustrated and anxious that things are not going your way, *The Secret Storm*. Actually, looking at a list of all soap opera titles, I was struck with allusions to spirituality: *One Life to Live*, *Search for Tomorrow*, *Another World*, *Another Life*, *As the World Turns*, *The Brighter Day*, *The Seeking Heart*, and so forth.

Other theologians have worked this up as a definition of God: That which is present yet cannot be expressed. And that is the reason for the image on the cover. An ellipsis is the three little dots that typographers use to indicate something is present, but not expressed.

So let's use the G-word freely in church and elsewhere. Let's claim a religious language for ourselves. If we don't talk about God in ways that make sense to us, other people will and I'll bet we won't like what they say.

*HYMN 63, Spring Has Now Unwrapped the Flowers*

*BENEDICTION*

In your life, may you know the holy meaning, the mystery that breaks in every moment. May you live at peace with your world and at peace with yourself. And may the love of truth guide you in your days.

*EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE*

We extinguish this flame,  
but not the light of its truth  
the warmth of this community  
nor the fire of our commitment.  
These we carry in our hearts  
and share with all the world.