

Where God Lives

The Rev. Linda W. McFadden
First & St. Stephen's UCC, Baltimore, MD
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Rev. 21:10, 21:22-22:5; John 14:23-29

A wealthy woman in New York City died and left her entire estate to God. Her unusual bequest created a legal quandary, so a lawsuit was instituted in which "God" was named as a party. A summons was issued and process servers went through the motions of trying to serve it. Finally they sent a report to the court: "After a due and diligent search, made in accordance with established procedures, God cannot be found in New York City."

Where does God live? If we went around the room this morning, we would probably have many answers to that question. Where do you find God? Some of us might say that God lives in nature or God lives in relationships.

The question of where God lives came up in a children's Sunday school class. The teacher said that God lives in heaven. But one little boy disagreed with her. "You don't think God lives in Heaven?" she asked. "No, he lives in our bathroom." "How do you know?" "Because every morning my dad stands outside the bathroom door and yells, "My God, are you still in there?"

Of course, inasmuch as God is spirit that animates the entire cosmos, there is really no place God is *not* to be found, even New York City or some family's bathroom. The Jews believed that in one sense Yahweh could be localized to the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem temple. But at the same time, their scriptures testify to the transcendence and omnipresence of the Holy One. Psalm 139 describes how God knows us even while we are being knit together in our mother's womb and is aware of our thoughts even before we form them into speech. In fact, there is no place we can go where God is not already present:

Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. (Psalm 139:7-8)

How immensely comforting to know that God is everywhere. Yet like the Jews who went to the temple to be assured of God's presence, we yearn for a localized place where we know God can be found. According to Jesus, the place God is reliably found is not a physical address but a *relationship*. In John's gospel, he says, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (John 14:23). If we put it in the present tense, we can say that *God lives with those who love God*.

The church has historically hung its hat on the claim that God lives in the church, which is to say, through the life of the redemptive community of those who love Jesus Christ and are committed to living by his teachings. Scripture gives us the wonderful image that *God loves us so much that God has actually pitched a tent to live among us*. The intimacy and presence of the Holy empowers us to make a difference in the world.

We recognize, however, that we are living in a time and place when fewer and fewer people believe that the church is a place where God lives. At any rate, public opinion research suggests that participating in a church isn't particularly important to a majority of people in this country. Paradoxically, most people say that religion is important to them, yet they're increasingly likely to feel that such activities as Bible reading and prayer and being part of a local church are not necessary.

A pollster's findings include:

- 82% of adults believe that "God helps those who help themselves."
- 82% believe that "every person has the power to determine his or her own destiny in life."
- 81% agree that Christian faith is relevant to the way they live today, yet 66% say that churches in their area don't have any bearing on it.
- 63% think "the purpose of life is enjoyment and personal fulfillment."

A great many Americans see no contradiction in being self-involved and pleasure-oriented while thinking of themselves as "freelance Christians," without any sense of shared responsibility for what goes on in the world. This suggests that many people are content to work out their own salvation even as they hunger for connection and the wider human community suffers the lack of justice, mercy, love, and peace.

Dan Wakefield was seeking personal fulfillment and success but his life wasn't working so well. Wakefield was a writer, living in Los Angeles, writing for television. At age 48, nothing in life seemed to be going right for him. His long-time girlfriend had left him; his pulse and blood pressure skyrocketed; he was drinking heavily. He had reached a crisis point. He decided to return to Boston and try to change his life. He started to eat better and exercise, and somewhat to his surprise, he found himself returning to church. In his memoir *Returning*, he describes how it affected him:

Going to church, even belonging to it, did not solve life's problems . . . but it gave me a sense of living in a larger context, of being part of something greater than what I could see through the tunnel vision of my personal concerns.¹

The church connects us with "something greater." It helps each of us remember that life isn't just about "me" and my concerns. The church isn't just a social club

or a civic organization that does good works. Those of us who are here draw identity and strength from the cosmic drama of God's redeeming love known to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In that we find the "something greater" that makes a difference for Dan Wakefield or for us.

In the months I've been with you, I have been blessed with opportunities to hear some of your personal stories about how this church family has made a difference to you. You have found this to be a place where God lives. During these transitional months as you search and call a new pastor, I hope you will continue to tell one another your stories of how you experience God in this community. Remembering and celebrating the ways that God speaks to you in this community deepens and strengthens the ties that bind and helps you to connect with the people out there--the unchurched, the unloved, the hopelessly lost in a surfeit of options. Remembering the ways God lives here will help you take God's love out there where it's needed.

And it is needed out in the world we live in from one day to the next. The church remains a redemptive community only if we continue to move back and forth between the wider community and the church community.

The courts of New York may not have been able to find God in New York City, but Rev. F. Forrester Church, who was a Unitarian pastor in Manhattan, found God in the activity of his congregation. He writes:

I find people constantly changing, their lives being transformed through acts of service. Then they come back to the community, their faith begins to grow . . . And they inspire others through their own evangelism, through their own missionary zeal. Almost everyone in the church brings friends. That's because its promises are not rhetorical and neither are they directed toward the selfish ambitions of the individual, namely, his or her own salvation. They are directed toward the communal needs that each of us share in an interdependent world.

Where does God live? God lives right here, on York Road and in Manhattan and in small villages on distant continents--wherever God's people gather in the name of Christ and wherever God's people go out to embody Christ's love.

The chant "Ubi Caritas" puts it in a nutshell: *Wherever there is love, God is there.* Please remain seated and sing it with me now.

Ubi caritas et amor. Ubi caritas, Deus ibi est.

ⁱ Penguin Books, 1984, p. 20.