

## **YOUR APPLICATION TO BECOME GOD HAS BEEN REJECTED**

A sermon preached by the Reverend John H. Nichols to The Channing Memorial Church of Newport, R.I. on April 10, 2011

In the UU seminary I attended, the students and faculty divided into those who believed in God, who were called Theists and those who did not, who were called Humanists. At one point, these two groups became hostile camps, and it seemed to me there needed to be some way to ease the tension. But, I was just joking, when I suggested that we hold a football game to decide the matter. Some took it very seriously.

To my horror, suddenly the date for the First Annual Humanist-Theist touch football game was set. Students and even some of the younger faculty began signing up for the Humanist or Theist teams. The teams began to practice. The agnostics agreed to referee.

Those of us on the Theist team decided to concentrate on our passing game. We figured our best chance was to loft the ball into the air in hopes of receiving divine assistance. (This was before Doug Flutie gave new emphasis to idea of a "Hail Mary" pass.) The Humanists developed a defensive and running strategy. They counted on either intercepting our passes or making logical end runs around our front line.

Well, the game never happened. It rained that day, and the truth is we were all relieved. The thought of having to throw a block on my church history professor was a little daunting, particularly since I hadn't taken his course yet.

In those days, we thought the most important question anyone could answer was, "Is there a God". My thoughts have changed since then. I now believe the central concern of all religions is not a question but a statement. That statement is, "You are not God." What we believe about God is interesting, but it is much more important that we understand we cannot play God to ourselves or to anyone else. When we accept that we cannot play God, and that we have no need to be God, we can live much happier lives.

What do I mean by "You cannot play God."? I mean you are never in complete control of your own life. You cannot control every event that affects your life or that of your loved ones. That includes some of the good things that will happen as well as some of the bad things. You can't plan it. You can't entirely control it.

It's tempting to try to maintain the illusion that everything is under control. But holding on to that illusion only means that more often than not we live with unhappiness and frustration, because the secret to a good life is recognizing that we are bombarded by the unexpected, much of which is nurturing and good.

It is not so easy to refrain from playing God or from creating an image that we think will protect us as we hope God would protect us. You will recall this matter s got covered in the Book of Exodus. Having escaped from slavery during the Passover event, the Hebrew former slaves constructed a golden calf while Moses was up on Mt. Sinai receiving the commandment, “You shall not make for yourselves a graven image.” But what was wrong with graven images? What was the harm in creating that golden calf? Why was Moses so bent out of shape by a simple statue?

Let’s review the story. Remember that the Hebrews had been ambivalent about leaving Egypt. They weren’t as unhappy in Egypt as Moses thought. As it turned out, they actually feared freedom more than slavery, and as they spent months and years in the desert the strains of living together in freedom began to show.

They hoped that somehow crazy Moses would pull them through. They didn’t like Moses all that much, but they had convinced themselves he probably knew what he was doing. At the least, they hoped he knew something they didn’t. They hoped he knew the way out of the desert.

But, Moses had been staying up on Mt. Sinai for a long time. This worried his followers. The top of the mountain was shrouded in clouds. Violent tremors shook the mountain and even the earth. They heard thunder by day, and by night they saw lightening shoot out of the dark clouds and strike the peaks where they believed Moses to be. This was a time of high anxiety for them – bordering on despair.

At such times of high anxiety, most people either want to take on God-like powers or they want to be close to someone who does claim God-like power. They want to be in control or they want to know that someone else is in control – as they imagine God would be fully in control.

When people feel things are getting out of control, the loudest voices get listened to first. When noise and confusion abound, what some shout mindlessly sounds like wisdom to others. When people are panicked God-like judgments are listened to more readily. Impulsive gestures are mistaken for decisive action, and the loss of freedom seems a small price to pay for certainty. So they created a god for themselves. They created a golden calf.

What good is a god that we know we have created and can control? Here is where the irony of the story plays itself out. Despite the fact it makes no sense to create artificial gods to go before us, and then to worship them with our time, our money and even our health, we do it anyway. We fool ourselves this way all the time. We create gods like money, pleasure, certainty, beauty and success. We create them because they offer a fragile reed to which we cling when we feel things are out of control.

The Hebrew people melted their gold down and shaped it into a golden calf that would go before them and be to them an image of their own strength and greatness. With that symbol, they hoped to convince themselves they were braver and smarter and more successful than they actually felt they were.

What is it about our golden calves that make us feel more secure? What do we hope will ease our anxieties about the present or future? Whatever that calf we create is – money, pleasure, success, certainty, beauty – we hope it will bless us in the same way that we might hope God will bless us.

Let me give you a personal example of how we seek blessings through the images we create and live for. For all of my growing up years, I was known as a hard worker. I got praise for working hard but for little else. So I decided that hard work was what I was all about. Hard work would gain me recognition, appreciation and even love. I worked so hard I wrote the longest Doctoral thesis in that seminary's history up to that point. Later, as a young minister I loved nothing more than filling my appointment book with people to visit, meetings to go to and things to do sometimes leaving my family behind.

All of this was an attempt to squelch a nagging question: who was I really? If I was good only for hard work, what would I be good for if I stopped working so hard. To halt that question in its tracks, I made a fragile deity to go before me. It was called John the Hard Worker. I convinced myself that the world would come crashing down around all of us if this hard work deity were not in control of my life and obeyed daily. I thought everyone depended upon me to do this work. Several years later I found out this tendency is called "workaholism" and that it bears similarities to other false religions, which also become addictions.

I still love hard work, by the way. We should all have something we enjoy doing that needs to be done. The traits I will mention this morning are also good traits until we elevate them to the status of golden calf and worship them; until we make our self image itself a golden calf and allow it to take over everything else we think and do. We then serve that image slavishly dismissing our need to be open to other people or experiences, open to new events, open to surprises and open to love from wherever it may come.

I also want to speak for a moment about the golden calf, which is the idol of toughness. Those who worship this idol present themselves as follows. We're tough. We can take it. When the going gets tough, the tough get going. You can say anything you want about us. It just rolls right off. Negative feedback? No problem.

Our friends walk away perplexed or hurt because they cannot penetrate our toughness? Who needs a lot of friends anyway? Have you ever known anyone like that? Do you really believe that criticism just rolls right off them?

All of us must develop some toughness to survive the ways in which people and events can roll over us. I can appreciate how worshipping toughness seems to offer the only sure protection against a world that can hurt us. But even if our idol could protect us against everything that wounds, that protection would yield only a state of existence and not a life. There are times – not all the time, but times – when we have to be wounded in order to learn and love.

I want to speak briefly about the golden calf of certainty. Those who worship at this shrine research everything discuss and consult and revisit and discuss and consult, often working themselves into a state of high tension. No draft of a document is final until it has been revised fifteen times.

The problem is that in the end we aren't given certainty or perfection. We cannot earn it, buy it, beg it or steal it. We do our best and make our decisions in the hope we will be right more often than wrong. That is all we can do. We will be happier when we can accept that occasionally we might be wrong and then discover that if we were wrong our world did not fall apart. Sometimes, the quest for certainty drives humanity away.

The quest for bodily perfection has become a golden calf for some. Some of our daughters have wanted to become slimmer than a young person should be. Some of our sons are tempted to compromise their health to become more muscular. Many of us have hit the cinder tracks, the roadsides, the treadmills, the bicycles, and the health clubs, jogging, lifting, and swimming in a regular regime.

There is nothing wrong with this activity as long as it holds at least a shred of enjoyment in it for us. The spiritual problem arrives when we sacrifice happiness and, most importantly, our own sense of balance for an idol or goal of physical beauty or perfection or a perfect cholesterol count. I cannot think of any medical or psychological value in undergoing prolonged torture just to honor some ideal image or goal of perfection.

But, it is also possible to make a golden calf out of indulgence. We use food or drink or any lavish life style to compensate ourselves – as we expect a proper god should compensate us – for the normal aches and pains of living. If the God of Moses has not kept anxieties away from our doorstep, then we will worship the god of consumption, which promises to keep the good times rolling.

I had a friend in ministry who worshipped alternately the god of consumption and the god of abstinence. He was driven to consumption by his own worries about how the congregation was treating him. I always knew when those anxieties were high, because he would announce the formation of the UU Gourmet Explorers Club.

They would visit restaurants together. If his parishioners were going to cause him to gain weight, he was going to take as many of them with him as possible. About six months later – when he felt he had exacted enough revenge – he announced the formation of the UU Weight Watchers Group.

My point in all of this is that our lives are circumscribed with limitations. Sometimes they irritate us, and sometimes we hate them, and sometimes we even fear them. Sometimes we create false idols to pretend that we don't have them. But limitations they are, and our best bet for happiness is to learn to navigate within them. Belief in God – for those who do – is a formal way of recognizing and honoring that we have limitations and will live within them. But Humanists and Theists both need to find their own ways to honor and even love the world that is imperfect, unplanned and constantly unexpected.

You will recall that in the story of Adam and Eve, God first gives them the freedom of the Garden of Eden. God tells them they need to name and take care of the plants and animals – so now they have both freedom and responsibilities. Then God tells them they cannot eat of the fruit of a particular tree. Now, they have freedom, responsibility and a limitation.

Well, of course they want more. So they eat the forbidden fruit, and according to the text, “They knew they were naked.” This is not what it seems. The passage had nothing to do with nudity. Adam and Eve did not suddenly become modest. Their “nakedness” in this context means that suddenly each knew that he and she were capable of doing anything possible to advance his or her own self-interest.

With that knowledge – that all men and women have the capacity to become profoundly self-absorbed and even exploitive – Adam and Eve suddenly hid from each other. Then they hid from God. Then each tried to shift the responsibility for his or her action onto someone else. As a consequence they got kicked out of the Garden of Eden. They would be allowed to lead perfectly fine lives in freedom, but they would always have responsibilities. And they would always have limitations.

This story was never about Original Sin. Instead it is a simple, cleverly told tale, which suggests that we will thoroughly enjoy our freedoms when we recognize we also have responsibilities, and we have limitations.

Our limitations are that none of us will be universally popular or loved or admired or powerful or successful or knowledgeable. None of us will stay forever young, and no one should want to. When we try to push too hard at these limitations we neglect our responsibilities and take the path that leads into darkness. When we accept those limitations, the freedom we gain from the anxieties of worshipping our false God, then allows us to live fuller and more open and affectionate lives.

Freedom, as it turns out, is more than getting out from under Pharoah's thumb. It is finally accepting all responsibility for who we are, how we are governed and what we will become.

Perhaps this is why Moses chose these as his last words to his people. "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life that you and your descendents may live." He was reminding them that once in order to quiet their deepest anxieties and ambitions they had constructed and worshipped an idol. They should not do that again. Neither should we.