

# They Don't Speak for Me

24 September 2006

Bible passage: **Hebrews 11:1** (*The Message*)

The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It's our handle on what we can't see

**Sermon nugget:** What do we believe?

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During the summer, we conducted a marketing survey among Gardeners and others to determine why people come here. The number one reason that people gave for attending The Garden was "theology," and by that I'm assuming that means our understanding of who God is and how God intersects with us and our lives. How does our understanding of God influence who we are?

That's something we've talked about quite a bit here at The Garden, but it's typically one piece at a time of what we believe. Today we decided to be more forthright today and try to pull together all the strands that make up what we assume everyone meant when they said "theology."

Part of me wonders if, in fact, it's a mixture of theology and our philosophy, but I don't know that for sure. My presupposition is that our theology informs and shapes why and how we do what we do. So, in the minutes I have this morning, I'm going to try to be more direct in naming what that is and where I see us theologically.

I want to be clear that I'm not saying this is where we all are, or have to be. You may agree with what I have to say, and you may disagree. That's OK. What I want most is that we wind up thinking about our beliefs for ourselves, and not just blindly accept something just because I or someone else says it.

You may be wondering about the title, "They Don't Speak for Me," so let me explain. Especially in the United States, there seems to be a certain understanding of what Christianity is, and frankly, there's a large part of that understanding that I would prefer not to be associated with! The loudest voice today seems to be coming from the "Christian right," the conservative arm of Christianity.

Someone recently shared with me that out of all the spokespersons for Christianity in the media over the last 5-6 years, only those representing that more conservative voice are heard. No mainline moderate or progressive voices are ever asked for comments on world happenings and controversial issues on any of the network or cable news sources. When there's only one voice being heard, it's easy to get the impression that the spokespersons represent all Christians. I'm here to tell you that "they don't speak for me." That's why we have today's title.

Alan Jones, Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, states a similar thing in the introduction to his book, *Reimagining Christianity: Reconnect Your Spirit Without Disconnecting Your Mind.* He writes, "I have encountered unparalleled meanness and unearned and unasked-for love. Some Christians make me want to throw up. Others touch and inspire me with their sheer

presence and generosity of spirit. Many of them wouldn't consider me one, and if they're right, I'm not and grateful not to be one."

What Jones is saying, in his own way, is what I want to say this morning, and that is that there is more than one way to be "Christian," to be a person of faith. The voice that may turn us off to faith is not the only voice to be heard; there are others who fall into other camps, so let me share with you where I/we come down. It may be a "fresh perspective on faith" for some.

One of the first things that's important to say is that we don't require that anyone "jump through any hoops" to be part of The Garden. We consider everyone a part of God's family, and no one is asked to profess a certain set of beliefs in order to be here. We often talk about the fact that most of us here at The Garden share common values more than we share common beliefs.

Years ago, I led a class on "working out your own beliefs," and I believe that's what each of us is to do, and why, then, our beliefs are so varied and different. It's not our beliefs that unite us, but the grounding beneath those beliefs. So that means that I'm not here to tell you what to believe, and to wait for you to acquiesce before you can be here. Rather, I prefer to share some thoughts that, each in our own way, we can mull over in our minds and hearts. Each of us is on our own spiritual journey, just by living our lives, and our beliefs and convictions change from age to age. The most important thing to me is that we choose to be here and are open to wrestling with what we believe, and to make whatever we believe our own. Exploring our faith is, for me, more about asking and being willing to live the questions than it is about having all the answers.

Bob Blake, a long-time Gardener, has been developing a process by which each of us can write our own "faith statement," a summary of where we are currently in our spiritual lives. It includes some different faith perspectives, as well as the use of a tool on [beliefnet.com](http://beliefnet.com) called the "Belief-o-matic." You might check out that website for something to think about.

We've done a few sessions already, and have shared our statements with one another. No two are alike, and there is a delightful richness in the diversity of statements that people have shared. I hope when the opportunity presents itself this fall to participate in one of the groups, or in the to-be-developed online version, that many more of us will choose to take part. It's both fun and revealing to begin to put some words around where we are spiritually, while at the same time knowing that what we say today may not be what we'll say tomorrow.

So, enough of all that. Let's think about what we can say about what we believe here at The Garden. I guess for me, the first thing is something I've already said--that faith is a journey, not a destination. By the very act of being human, we're all at some place along that journey, and the journey looks very different from person to person. The fact that we're here together speaks to the reality that we're at least considering acknowledging that journey.

Secondly, and in no order of importance, I'd say that our spiritual lives are about relationship—relationship with God, the One who

is beyond us, as well as relationship with one another, and our relationship with our own selves. Jesus, when asked the greatest commandment, said that we are to love God, to love our neighbor, and to love ourselves. That's relationship, and like any relationship, it ebbs and flows, grows and changes, deepens and enriches. It's a vital, dynamic, life-giving connection with that we call "God" and with the God-likeness we find within each other and ourselves.

Next, I'd have to say that I believe that God is love, and God is good. I'd rather not try to assign human characteristics to that which is beyond description or definition. We get a hint of God's love for us in the love we often see of a parent for a child, but only a hint. God's love is an overwhelming, beyond our wildest imagination, kind of love that manifests itself in every way imaginable.

We are each one of God's children, and that means that God loves us, accepts us where we are and as who we are, and welcomes us—no strings attached. That's where one of the basics of what's being called "progressive Christianity" reflects where I am. It says, ["Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable."](#)

What does God want for us? Because God is who God is, I believe God's desire for each of us is to live a life that is full and good. I do not believe God is out to get us, or that God tests us or punishes us. Rather, in whatever we experience in life, God is always at work, trying to bring good out of even the worst of circumstances.

Next, I have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus. Although my path is and has always been the Christian path, I do not believe that is the only way to God. Once again, to use "progressive Christianity's" terminology: [Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us.](#)

To put that in practical terms, I do not think that God rules anyone out because they are a part of other faith traditions. The paths to God are many and varied, but I believe all faith paths lead to the same God. I don't think we need to concern ourselves with making those judgment calls about others and their faith practices or beliefs.

In regards to the Bible, I do not believe it is the inerrant word of God, dictated by God, and intended to be taken literally. To read and study the Bible that way, in my view, deprives it of its universal truths and richness. For me, the Bible is composed of human accounts of people trying to be in relationship with a being, a power, a force that cannot be totally known or understand, and trying to be faithful in the best way they know how. That's the universal nature of what we find in the Bible. Marcus Borg, in his book *The Heart of Christianity*, quotes a Catholic priest who once said in a sermon, ["The bible is true, and some of it happened."](#) There are truths imbedded there, but we cannot and should not try to take everything literally and factually.

Yet another tenet of belief for me is that all of life is holy. There is no separation between the sacred and the secular. God is in everything, and everything is in and of God. There is no "God in a box," but God is within us, in every idea and insight, in every breath we breathe, in every move we make, in every hope and dream, in every tear we cry or laugh we share. God-ness permeates every instant of all of life.

That's why I like the word "wholeness." Rather than putting everything into compartmentalized boxes...God on Sundays in church, work in the 8-5, 5 days a week box, family in another box, and so on, wholeness means that body, mind, spirit are all together in one. That which has to do with our emotional or psychological well-being is wholeness, and so is our physical health and fitness. Wholeness encompasses all of life—the ups and downs, the joys, the sorrows, the successes, and the failures. Wholeness includes hope, joy, love, faith, peace, and much, much more.

I believe that faith is not about the creeds we utter or the words we say; faith is about how we live and how we love. It's not much good to spout lots of words about Jesus, and yet live our lives ignoring those whom Jesus would never ignore. Rather than talking about Jesus, I think the world would be a lot better place if more of us tried to live as he did. The way we act toward one another is the best sign of what we believe.

I've just finished reading Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *Leaving Church*, and she talks about this very thing—living like Jesus. She describes Jesus as the one ["who lived and died with such authentic faith in God that he gave his followers the courage to try to do the same thing."](#)

I like that, and I think it means trying to love the unlovable, accept the unacceptable, forgive the unforgivable, reach out to the homeless, the hungry, the broken, and realize that at one time or another, and in one way or another, all of us are homeless, hungry or broken. It's showing compassion and love for everyone we encounter. It's about how we treat our environment, and how we treat our neighbors, next door and on the other side of the world. It's about how we relate to our co-workers, as well as our friends and family.

My friends, don't know where you are today on the spiritual journey, but I just know that our spiritual life is a matter of both head and heart, and it is the essence of what is life. Our faith is heart and soul, mind and spirit—it's all of who we are and what we are. It may take a leap for us to claim faith, but I believe that this leap is worth taking. As our Bible passage says, ["The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It's our handle on what we can't see."](#) Amen and amen.

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that each of us will think prayerfully about our own journey of faith, and know that we aren't walking alone on a deserted street. We have lots of friends and neighbors who walk with us. Let's hold hands, help one another, and journey on. OK?

Have a great Sunday and go in peace. Amen.