Foreword

I spend my days with people the world has decided are mistakes. I know what the word does to people. It hollows them out and leaves a shape standing.

That is why I love this book.

Durrell Watkins pastors a church that says the opposite sentence, every Sunday, to every person in the room and on the screen: You are God's miracle and not God's mistake. He says it to the old man who buried his friends in the plague years. He would say it to the men I sit with, and he would mean it.

Sunshine Cathedral rests on one idea, God is omnipresent Love, and on the nerve to follow that idea into the closet and into the cage. Now Durrell has written it down, and he has written it so that nobody can take it from his people.

I am thankful for my friendship with Sunshine. I serve there as Canon Missioner for Death Penalty Abolition. I am thankful for Robert Griffin, Durrell's husband and the Cathedral's Executive Minister, a friend to me in his own right. I am thankful for the two of them as a couple: two bishops under one roof, and the love between them is part of what that church is. I am proud of Durrell, and I am proud of what they have built together out of the hurts caused by hatred.

Read this book. Then go find the people who have been told they are mistakes and tell them otherwise.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood
Canon Missioner for Death Penalty Abolition
Sunshine Cathedral

Preface: A Different Kind of Church

The first thing people notice is the applause.

The final song of a Sunday service at Sunshine Cathedral is almost always a joyful one, often a choreographed one, and when it ends the room does something rooms in churches are not supposed to do. It erupts. People clap, some of them whistle, a few of them are on their feet before the last chord has finished ringing. Then a voice says, "Our worship has ended, let our service begin," and a few hundred people who have just been told that God is love, that kindness is the highest form of worship, and that they are God's miracle and not God's mistake, go out into the parking lot and into the week.

Visitors ask about it. Is the applause for the band? For the choir? For the person who gave the homily? The honest answer is that nobody is entirely sure, and that it doesn't matter. The applause is for the hour. It is the sound of people who were told for years that they didn't belong in a church discovering that they were in one, and that it was glad to have them.

The second thing people notice is the blend. In a single hour you may hear a Charles Wesley hymn, a Broadway number, a gospel chorus, and something by Debussy. The readings will come from the Bible and probably also from somewhere else: the Tao te Ching, a Sufi poet, a contemporary novelist, a physicist. The clergy will be vested, but not in matching vestments. The prayers will sound Anglican in one breath and like a New Thought treatment in the next. The Communion table will be open to everyone, including people who don't believe a word of what was just said about it.

The third thing people notice, if they stay long enough, is that under all of that variety there is exactly one idea. It gets said in a dozen ways, but it is one idea, and every homily, every prayer, every affirmation, every Power Thought that lands in your inbox at nine in the morning circles back to it.

God is omnipresent Love.

This book is an attempt to say what that means, where it came from, and what it builds.

Why "theology"

The word "theology" makes some people nervous, and I understand why. For a lot of the people who find their way to Sunshine Cathedral, theology was the thing that hurt them. It was the reasoning behind the rejection. It was the verse quoted at the dinner table before they were asked to leave it. It was the sermon they sat through at sixteen, learning that the God who made them had made a mistake. Theology, for them, was the weapon.

So it would be reasonable to ask why a church that exists to heal the hurts caused by hatred would want a theology at all. Why not just love people and skip the doctrine?

The answer is that everybody has a theology. The person who says "I don't do theology, I just love people" has a theology: it is the theology that love is what matters most, that God (if there is one) cares more about how we treat each other than about what we believe, and that doctrine is less important than kindness. That is a perfectly good theology. It happens to be roughly ours. But it is a theology, and it is stronger when we know that it is.

An unexamined theology can be taken from you. Someone with a louder voice and a thicker concordance can talk you out of it, because you never worked out why you believed what you believed. You just felt it. Feeling is where it starts, but feeling alone

doesn't hold up in a hospital waiting room at three in the morning, or at a family funeral where the preacher is using your loved one's body as an occasion to condemn you.

Sunshine Theology is what happens when a community of people who were hurt by bad theology decides not to abandon theology but to do it better. It is examined. It has reasons. It knows where it came from. It has been tested against the worst that fear-based religion can throw at it, and it has held.

That said, it is not a system. Nobody at Sunshine Cathedral is going to hand you a catechism and ask you to sign it. There is no doctrinal statement you must affirm to receive Communion, or to be baptized, or to be a member. We have said for a long time that questions are more important than answers, and we mean it. What follows is not a set of conclusions to be accepted. It is a set of conversations that have been going on at Sunshine Cathedral for decades, written down so that you can join them.

Why "sunshine"?

The literal answer is geography. Sunshine Cathedral is in Fort Lauderdale, in the Sunshine State, and the name was there before the theology was. The parish started with the name of Metropolitan Community Church of the Holy Spirit. That doesn't flow easily off the tongue and so the simpler and more memorable designation, "Sunshine Cathedral," was born.

Sunshine is light and warmth; it is life-giving. It represents the "Inward Light" of the Quakers, the Higher Power of 12 Step programs, the Johannine description of God as light. The Sun shines even when we do not see it and it's at the center of our universe (our lives) even when we forget that it is. What a beautiful metaphor for divine light, divine love, divine life: God.

Names have a way of growing into meanings, and this one has.

Sunshine is the opposite of the closet. The closet is dark, airless, and small, and the whole point of it is that no one can see in. Coming out is walking into the light. There's a Hebrew word in Genesis, usually translated "go," that can be rendered "walk toward yourself." That is what sunshine does: it lets you be seen, first by yourself and then by others, as you actually are.

Sunshine is also the opposite of the fear that a great deal of religion runs on. Fear-based religion is a religion of shadows. It teaches you to hide your doubts, hide your questions, hide your body, hide who you love. It keeps God in the dark, too: distant, often angry, unknowable except through the right intermediaries. Sunshine Theology says God is not hiding. God is not in the shadows waiting to catch you. God is the light in which you are already standing.

And sunshine is, finally, a fair description of what people report when they walk into the building on a Sunday morning. It is loud, warm, a little over the top, and in it, it is difficult to be sad. We are not embarrassed by that. Joy is a spiritual discipline as well as one of the nine attributes of the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trust, humility, and self-control). Joy is something we seek, practice, and share intentionally and consistently.

The one idea

Let me say it again, because everything else in this book depends on it.

God is omnipresent Love.

Take the words one at a time.

Omnipresent means everywhere, fully. Not spread thin like butter over too much bread, but wholly present at every point. There is not a spot where God is not. There is not a moment when God is not. There is not a person in whom God is not. This is not a poetic flourish; at Sunshine Cathedral it is the closest thing we have to a creed. Daisy Baum, one of the early teachers in the Divine Science tradition, wrote it in 1909 and we still say it: "There is but one All. This one that is All is the living presence of God everywhere. This all-inclusive One is Love, Life, Wisdom, and Power. I am in and a part of this Presence now."

Notice what that does. If God is everywhere, then God is not somewhere else. God is not up, or out, or back in the first century, or ahead in some future judgment. God is here. If God is in everyone, then no one is outside God's love: not the person you were told was an abomination, not the person who told you so. If God is fully present, then you do not have to earn your way into God's presence, or be let into it by someone holding the keys. You are already in it. You were born in it. You could not get out of it if you tried.

Love is what the omnipresence is. This matters, because an omnipresent God could in principle be anything: omnipresent rage, omnipresent cruelty, omnipresent terror. Some people have been taught exactly that, a God who is everywhere in the sense that you can't get away from the surveillance. Sunshine Theology says no. The everywhere-God is Love. The first letter of John says it flatly, "God is love," and John's gospel adds that God is spirit and God is light. The Psalmist also said God was light. Love, light, spirit: presence, illumination, breath. That is the God that is everywhere.

God is the word we use for all of that. We use other words, too. You will hear Spirit, Presence, the Omnipresence, Divine Mind, the Thing Itself (that's Ernest Holmes's phrase), Ground of Being (that's Paul Tillich's), Goddess, the One, Ultimate Reality, Life. None of them is adequate, and we don't pretend otherwise. Meister Eckhart prayed that God would rid him of God, by which he meant rid him of every small idea that had the name "God"

stuck to it. We pray the same. A God that finite intelligence can adequately describe is really just one more idol.

Everything in this book is that one idea, turned to face a different direction. Turn it toward Christmas and you get a story about a God who is with us because God could not be anywhere else. Turn it toward Easter and you get a love that keeps showing up after the empire has done its worst. Turn it toward the Bible and you get an anthology of people trying to say what it feels like to live inside an everywhere-God, and getting it partly right. Turn it toward prayer and you get, not begging, but remembering. Turn it toward a young person who has just been thrown out of the house for coming out, and you get the sentence we say most often of all: you are God's miracle and not God's mistake.

Three streams, one river

Sunshine Theology did not come from nowhere, and it did not come from one place. It is a blend of three traditions, each of which brought something the others lacked.

The first is progressive Christianity. This is the stream that keeps us Christian. We read the Bible, we follow Jesus, we keep the Christian year, we baptize and we break bread. But we do these things the way progressive Christians do them: with the insights of modern scholarship, with the understanding that the Bible is a library and not a rulebook, with the conviction that other religions also carry wisdom and holiness, with science as a partner rather than an enemy, and with the belief that the way of Jesus leads to justice, tolerance, goodwill, and peace, or it isn't the way of Jesus.

The second is New Thought. This is the stream that gave us omnipresence as a working doctrine, and it is the stream that is new to many visitors. New Thought began in nineteenth-century America as a healing movement. Its teachers (many of them women, at a time when women could not be ordained in most churches) held that God is the one Presence and Power in the universe, that we are part of that Presence, that our thoughts and attitudes shape our experience, and that prayer is not pleading with a distant deity but aligning ourselves with a Love that is already here. Six of our clergy, including the senior minister, are ordained in Divine Science, one of the oldest New Thought traditions. When you hear an affirmative prayer at Sunshine Cathedral, a prayer that declares rather than begs, you are hearing New Thought.

The third is spiritual humanism. This is the stream that keeps us honest. Humanism says that this life, in this world, is our central concern; that human beings are responsible for human affairs; that reason and evidence are how we find out what is true; and that the point of religion is to make life better for actual people. Spiritual humanism adds that the best parts of religion (community, ritual, altruism, awe, a safe place to ask the big questions) are worth keeping, reinterpreted for people who live in a scientific age. At

Sunshine Cathedral you will find theists and non-theists, pantheists and panentheists, people who pray to a personal God and people who would never use the word “God” at all, all singing the same songs. Spiritual humanism is why that works.

Blending three traditions sounds like a recipe for incoherence. In practice it has been the opposite. Each stream corrects the others. Progressive Christianity keeps New Thought from floating off into abstraction; it insists on a Jesus who was a Palestinian peasant executed by an empire, not a metaphysical anomaly. New Thought keeps progressive Christianity from becoming merely a set of political positions with a Bible attached; it insists that there is a Presence, that prayer changes something (if not “out there” then at least in us), that healing is real (even when it doesn’t seem to include a cure). Spiritual humanism keeps both of them from taking themselves too seriously; it insists that a theology is only as good as the lives it produces.

And all three flow into the one river. Progressive Christianity says God is love and that everyone has sacred value. New Thought says God is everywhere and that we are one with God. Spiritual humanism says whatever God is, the test is here and now, in how we treat one another. Put them together and you get: God is omnipresent Love, and the proof is a community that heals the hurts caused by hatred.

Who this book is for

I have written this book with three readers in mind.

The first is the newcomer. You walked in on a Sunday, or you found the stream online, and you have questions. Why did they read from the Tao te Ching? What was that prayer that sounded like a self-help affirmation? Why does everyone keep saying “kin-dom” instead of “kingdom”? Is this even Christian? This book is the long answer to all of those questions. You can read it front to back, or you can go straight to the chapter that names the thing you’re wondering about.

The second is the member who wants to go deeper. You have been here for years. You know the affirmations by heart. You could give the homily. But you have never quite been able to explain to your sister, or your coworker, or the version of yourself that still wakes up at three in the morning, why this church believes what it believes. This book is meant to give you the words.

The third is the reader who has never been to Fort Lauderdale and never will. You picked this up because you are a progressive Christian looking for a theology that has a spine, or a New Thought person looking for a tradition that hasn’t forgotten Jesus, or a humanist who misses singing, or a queer person of any faith or none who was told that the church had no room for you and wants to know whether that was true. It wasn’t. This book is one church’s attempt to show you what the room looks like.

How to read it

The book is in four parts.

Part One, Foundations, lays out the core ideas: who Jesus is for us, why Christ is a queer icon, how we read the Bible, what omnipresence means, what justice-love asks of us, and why every person is God's miracle.

Part Two, The Year of Love, walks through the Christian year the way we keep it at Sunshine Cathedral, from Advent through Pentecost, with a detour through a season we invented: Pridetide, the month of June. Each chapter began as a homily, and reads like one. The liturgical year is how a community lives its sacred stories rather than merely learning them, so this is the longest part of the book, and the most practical.

Part Three, The Streams, goes to the sources: progressive Christianity, New Thought (including a full chapter on how we pray), spiritual humanism, and the art of blending them.

Part Four, A Different Kind of Church, is about Sunshine Cathedral itself: who we are, how we worship, how we recover from fear-based religion (there are twelve steps for that), how we give, and what we ask of one another.

You do not have to read the parts in order. You do not have to agree with any of it. What I would ask is that you read it the way we read the Bible: not as a crystal ball but as a conversation, not as a locked door but as an open one. Argue with it. Bring your own stories. Find the places where it seems mistaken to you, or where it is not yet right enough for you, and say so.

That is not a disclaimer. It is the method. A theology that cannot be questioned is not a theology, it is a fence, and we have had enough of those.

One more thing before we begin

Every homily at Sunshine Cathedral ends with these words: You are God's miracle and not God's mistake.

If you take nothing else from the pages that follow, take that. It is not a slogan. It is the whole of Sunshine Theology in eight words, and we believe it is true even if you cannot believe it yet.

The rest of this book is an explanation of why.

Durrell Watkins
Sunshine Cathedral, Fort Lauderdale, Florida
November 6, 2026

Part One: Foundations

Chapter 1: Jesus Is Lord

As a Christian, my affirmation of faith is “Jesus is Lord.” That means my faith vocabulary and experience is a challenge to empire, autocracy, and oppression. It means that in a world where Caesar was Lord of the vast empire, a group of subjects, slaves, and peasants dared to call someone else “Lord,” and the person they chose was a carpenter/fisher/possibly illiterate, itinerant preacher/Palestinian Jew from an occupied territory.

Caesar’s empire killed “Lord” Jesus and his admirers insisted that somehow, he didn’t stay dead! In story, ritual, imagination, and personal experience, he was still around (and remains so). So, calling Jesus “Lord” is an affirmation that significance isn’t limited to earthly/physical years, and it is a rebuke of empire, injustice, and cruelty.

Whose Lord?

It helps to know what the word sounded like in the first century, because it did not sound the way it sounds now.

Today “Lord” is a churchy word. It lives in hymns and in the King James Bible and almost nowhere else. Nobody’s boss is their lord. Nobody’s landlord is called lord to their face. The word has been sanded down by two thousand years of religious use until it means, roughly, “God, but in a more formal register.”

In the Roman world it was a political word before it was a religious one. Kyrios in Greek, dominus in Latin. It was what a slave called a master. It was what a subject called the emperor. And by the time Jesus was born, the emperor had made sure it meant a great deal more than that.

Augustus, who was ruling when Jesus was a child, had been declared divi filius, son of a god, because his adoptive father Julius Caesar had been deified by the Senate after his death. Temples were built to Augustus while he was still alive. Coins carried his face with divine titles stamped around it. An inscription from the city of Priene, dated about nine years before Jesus was born, announces Augustus’s birthday as the beginning of “good news” (the Greek word is euangelion, gospel) for the whole world, because he had been sent as a savior to end war and set everything in order. Savior. Son of God. Lord. Gospel. Peace on earth. Every one of those phrases belonged to the emperor before the Jesus movement borrowed them.

That borrowing was not an accident and it was not polite. When Paul writes that Christ Jesus is Lord, when Luke has angels announce “good news of great joy” and “peace on earth” at the birth of a peasant baby, when the gospels call Jesus the Son of God, the first hearers understood exactly what was being said. Somebody else holds the titles. Somebody else brings the peace. And the somebody else was a nobody from Galilee whom the empire had executed as a warning to other nobodies.

You could get killed for that. People did.

It occurs to me, then, that one cannot have Jesus as Lord and be a fan of unbridled militarism, systemic racism, legalized discrimination against Queer folk, colonization of women’s bodies, or tyrannical narcissism in seats of power. If Jesus is Lord, Caesar is not, whether he wears a crown or any other symbol of power.

The Lord Who Was a Peasant

It is worth pausing over who this Lord actually was, because the church has spent a long time making him into something else.

What we can say with reasonable confidence, drawing on the best of modern scholarship, is this: Jesus was a Jew from Nazareth, a village in Galilee so small it is never mentioned in any source outside the gospels. Galilee was a backwater of a backwater, an occupied province at the edge of an empire, and its people were mostly peasants: farmers, fishers, day laborers, artisans. Jesus was probably a tekton, a word usually translated “carpenter” but closer to “builder” or “handyman,” someone who worked with his hands and did not own land. Some scholars, such as John Dominic Crossan, doubt that he could read. It is very unlikely that he could write (which explains why we have no writings from him). He spoke Aramaic, the language of the poor, not the Greek of the educated or the Latin of the rulers.

At some point he attached himself to the movement of John the Baptizer, a wilderness prophet preaching repentance and offering a water ritual in the Jordan River. After John was arrested (and eventually executed) by Herod Antipas, Jesus began a movement of his own, traveling through the villages of Galilee, teaching in parables, healing people, sharing meals with the “wrong sorts” of people, and announcing that the kin-dom of God was at hand. He gathered a following. He went up to Jerusalem at Passover, was treated (according to sacred legend) as a conquering hero in a bit of street theatre, caused a disturbance in the Temple (confronting businesses that were exploiting pilgrims), and was arrested, tried, convicted, and executed by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, by the viscous means of crucifixion.

Crucifixion is the detail that tells you the most. Rome did not crucify people for religious opinions. Rome crucified seditionists and runaway slaves. It was a political punishment

for people who threatened the order, and it was deliberately public and deliberately slow. The sign over Jesus's head, INRI (Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews) was not an honorific. It was the charge. He was executed for sedition, for being in the eyes of the state, someone who claimed an authority that belonged to Caesar.

This is the person the first Christians called Lord; not a philosopher nor a deity who visited earth briefly in human disguise. He was a peasant from an occupied territory, killed by the empire for saying that God's realm was coming (and possibly was in our hands) and it did not look like Rome.

When the church forgets this, it starts calling other things Lord. It calls the nation Lord. It calls the flag Lord. It calls the market Lord, or the party, or the glorified bully who promises to make everything great again. And it goes on saying "Jesus is Lord" in the hymns, with the word sanded down to mean nothing at all.

There is, obviously, a sentimental and personal devotion involved in calling Jesus "Lord" as well.

In "The Black Church" traditions "Lord Jesus" and "King Jesus" were historically used over against the "masters" and "bosses" of the antebellum South and Jim Crow era, much as "Lord Jesus" was used over against the imperial oppression of the First Century.

And for all of us who have known oppression, marginalization, injustice, or cruelty, it is uplifting to remember that Jesus loved the unloved, touched the untouchable, saw and heard people who were perpetually overlooked, offered hope to the hopeless, and helped the broken and dis-eased feel whole again. For Jesus to be Lord means that we value compassion, kindness, tolerance, inclusivity, and hospitable welcome.

For Jesus to be Lord means we want bridges rather than walls.

For Jesus to be Lord means we hurt when we see others hurting.

For Jesus to be Lord means a healing touch (medical care) for everyone who needs it.

For Jesus to be Lord means that we would never and could never consider crushing the spirit of someone because of their heritage, the way they pray, or who they love.

For Jesus to be Lord means affirming the sacred value of ALL people.

It's too easy to make Jesus the distant face of a more distant god, but that doesn't make the world kinder, healthier, safer, or more joyful. I won't reduce Jesus to a deity. For me, he's Lord!

Who Do You Say That I Am?

In Mark's gospel, the oldest one we have, Jesus asks his disciples a question on the road to Caesarea Philippi. "Who do people say that I am?" They give him the gossip: some say John the Baptizer returned, some say Elijah, some say one of the other prophets. Then he asks the real question. "But who do you say that I am?"

Peter answers, “You are the Messiah.” And in Mark, Jesus doesn’t congratulate him. He orders them not to tell anyone, and then immediately starts talking about suffering and death, Peter objects, and Jesus calls him Satan. It is one of the strangest exchanges in the gospels, and I think it is strange on purpose. Peter had the right word and the wrong idea. He said “Messiah” and pictured a king. Jesus said “Messiah” and pictured a servant who shared the suffering of others.

The question has never stopped being asked, and the answers have never stopped changing. The first followers said Messiah, Lord, Son of God. The Greek-speaking church said Logos, the Word made flesh. The councils said Jesus was fully divine and fully human. The mystics said Lover, Spouse. The liberation theologians said the one who takes the side of the poor. Kittredge Cherry and others say the Queer Christ. Miguel De la Torre says the one crucified again every time the least of these is abused.

None of these is necessarily wrong, nor are any of them the last word. “Who do you say that I am” is not a quiz with a predetermined answer. Who Jesus is to anyone is a relationship, and relationships change the people in them. If Jesus is going to have a primary place in my consciousness, then my understanding of him is going to grow, shift, and sometimes reverse over the course of my life. I have called him teacher, healer, rebel, friend, elder sibling, and Lord. I may call him other things over time.

What I won’t do is stop considering the question. The one way to get the question wrong is to decide it has been settled.

The Shortest Creed

“Jesus is Lord” is, as far as we know, the oldest Christian confession. Paul quotes it as something already familiar to his readers in the mid-first century, within two decades of the crucifixion. Before the Apostles, Nicene, and Anthanasian Creeds, there was simply “Jesus is Lord. Three words in English. Two in Greek: Kyrios Iēsous.

I have come to believe that brevity is the point.

The longer creeds attempted to meet needs of their communities, but every clause they added is a place where someone can be excluded. Do you believe his birth defied the norms of nature? Do you believe he descended into a nether world? Do you accept Trinitarian doctrines that are post-biblical and non-Judaic? The longer the creed, the higher the wall.

“Jesus is Lord” leaves the wall low. It does not tell you what to believe about legends that developed about him; it asks one thing: is this peasant from Galilee, who loved the unloved and was killed by the empire for it, the one whose way you wish to follow? If yes, you’ve entered into an everlasting conversation.

That is the creed we offer at Sunshine Cathedral. We don’t demand obedience to any creedal formula, but it is an affirmation of faith we offer for your consideration.

Too many people worship their fears and hatreds and call them “God,” and many call that god “Jesus.” But if Jesus is Lord, then we will work ceaselessly for the oppressed, the marginalized, the forgotten, the weak, the hurting, the wounded, the hungry, the sick, the refugee, the asylum seeker, the justice seeker, the bullied, the shamed, the shunned, and all the so-called “least of these.”

The oldest creed of the Jesus Movement is “Jesus is Lord.” It remains the cry of my heart, and the motivation for how I wish and try to live in the world. And if Jesus is Lord, then we still have a lot of work to do.

Chapter 2: The Queer Christ

People who identify as Queer (or as any subset of the *LGBTQQIAAP2S+ community) often find in Jesus a queer icon. Stories of Jesus’s brutal execution and his significance that could not be buried or long hidden may resonate with people who have been persecuted and forced into the closet but emerged to a new, authentic, and more joyful life of truth and love. The Queer Christ coming out of oppression’s tomb is a powerful symbol for all who wish to come out into the light of authentic living.

**Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Allies, Asexual, Pansexual, 2 Spirit +*

The Tomb and the Closet

Consider what a tomb is. It is a small dark room with a stone across the door. Somebody else put you there. Its purpose is to hide a body that the world has decided has no more use. Nobody expects anything to come out of it.

Now consider what a closet is.

It is a small dark room with a door that other people would prefer you keep shut. Somebody else built it: a family, a church, a school, a culture that made it clear, long before you had words for who you were, that who you were was not to be seen. Its purpose is to hide a life that the world has decided it would rather not deal with. And the people who put you there do not expect anything to come out of it. That’s the point of it.

The gospels say that on the third day the women came to the tomb and the stone had been rolled away. Not chipped at. Not pried open a crack. Rolled away, so that the entrance stood wide open in the morning light. And the one placed in the tomb was reportedly no longer there.

Every person who has come out knows what that feels like. There is a before and an after, and the after is new life, a life lived in the open without shame or regret. Jesus’ friends don’t recognize the newly “out” Jesus. The couple on the road to Emmaus walk

with him for miles without recognizing him. That, too, is familiar. When someone comes out, the people who love them sometimes need a while to recognize them, because they had been looking at a version that was never quite there.

The Queer Christ is not a reading imposed on the Easter story from outside. It is what the story already says, heard by people who have lived it.

Theologian/historian Rev. Kittredge Cherry has stated in her blog: “All people are made in God’s image, so it is important to envision Jesus as Queer, Black, Brown, female and every other human category. The struggle for LGBTQ equality intersects and overlaps with movements for racial, economic, environmental and gender justice. I encourage everyone to explore multiple, different non-traditional ways to see Christ.”

The Christ Who Looks Like Us

Rev. Cherry’s point deserves a little more room, because it answers an objection that comes up often.

The objection goes: Jesus was a first-century Jewish man, so isn’t it dishonest to picture him as anything else? Isn’t a Queer Christ, or a Black Christ, or a female Christ, just wishful thinking dressed up as theology?

The first answer is that the church has never, for one moment, pictured Jesus as he actually was. Look at any painting of Jesus from the last fifteen hundred years of European art and you will see a European. Fair skin, often light hair, sometimes blue eyes. He is painted as a Dutchman by the Dutch and as an Italian by the Italians. Ethiopian icons paint him Ethiopian. Chinese Christian art paints him Chinese. Every culture that has received the story has painted the Christ it could recognize, because a Christ you cannot recognize is a Christ who cannot recognize you.

The literal, historical Jesus was a Palestinian Jew with features of the people of that region, and until recently very few have painted him that way. Nobody complains. Only when Christ is painted queer, or Black, or a woman, does anybody discover a sudden commitment to “historical accuracy.” And, it should be noted, that Jesus might have been quite dark, might have been somewhere in the LGBTQ+ lived experience, and might have been nonbinary. We can’t know that he was any of those things, but neither can we know that he wasn’t, and there should be no controversy in imagining the many different ways that Jesus might have experienced and expressed life.

The second answer is theological. Christ is not the same thing as Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus of Nazareth was a particular person who lived and died. Christ is the title the church gives to the genderless, nonphysical, “something” that was in him, and what the church claims did not die: the anointing, the light, the principle, the nature, the holy wisdom, the love that touched the untouchable. Christ is what the disciples met on the road to Emmaus

and did not recognize. Christ is what Paul says lives in him. Christ is what we mean when we say we are the Body of Christ, and none of us is a first-century Jewish man.

If Christ can be in Paul, and in the church, and in the scriptures, and in the sacraments, then Christ can be in a drag performer, a trans teenager, a lesbian grandmother, a gay man dying of AIDS in 1987 with no one to hold his hand. Cherry's own work has spent decades imagining exactly that: Christ with a female body on the cross, Christ as a gay man in a modern city, Christ in the faces of people the church would not let in. Some people find those images shocking. I find the alternative shocking: a Christ who can be everywhere and everyone except the people who most need to see him.

The Christ of Solidarity

There is another way the Christ is queer, and it does not depend on anybody's sexual orientation.

In Matthew 25 Jesus tells a story about the end of the age, when the nations are gathered and sorted. The criterion is not belief. It is not doctrine. It is not church attendance. It is: I was hungry and you fed me. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and in prison and you visited me. And when those who seek justice for all ask when they ever did any of that for him, he says: whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me.

Matthew's Jesus is not saying that helping the least of these is like helping him. He is saying it is helping him. Matthew has located the spirit of Jesus permanently, in the bodies of the people at the bottom. Whatever is done to them is done to Christ.

The ethicist Miguel De la Torre draws the conclusion that follows. If Jesus is in the least of these, then when Matthew Shepard was beaten, tied to a fence outside Laramie, Wyoming, and left to die in the cold in October of 1998 because he was gay, Jesus was crucified again. Not metaphorically. By Matthew's accounting, that is where Christ was.

Historically, Jesus was a Jewish Palestinian peasant with unknown paternity. But his solidarity with the suffering makes him Queer, Black, Trans, Latin, homeless, living with addiction, abandoned, war-ravaged, vilified, and demonized. Wherever a person is being crushed for who they are, that is where the Christ is standing, because that is the good news we find in our scriptures.

This is the Christ the gospels offer. A church that cannot see Christ in queer people cannot see Christ in the hungry or the prisoner either, because it is the same seeing. And a church that has learned to see Christ in queer people, because it had to, because its own people were dying and no one else would look, has learned something it can teach everyone.

Walking Toward Yourself

There is a Hebrew word used in the Bible that is translated as “go,” but a more literal translation would be “walk toward yourself.”

Coming out is walking toward yourself.

Learning and loving who you are is empowering.

Daring to walk toward yourself, embracing and celebrating your authentic self, is transformational.

Coming out first to yourself, then perhaps to the god of your understanding if you are a person of faith, and then to at least one other person allows the light of truth to shine, and our world needs both Truth and Love right now.

Coming out is a sharing of both Truth and Love.

Not everyone will celebrate your truth, but some will, and you will meet others who will delight in knowing the real you.

We each must do it in our own way and in our own time, but everyone who comes out begins a journey to pride and empowerment, and they light the way for others to do the same.

Coming out is a gift to ourselves, and living our truth is a gift to the world.

The Word Spoken to Abraham

The Hebrew phrase is lech lecha, and it is the first thing God says to Abraham in Genesis 12. Most English Bibles give “Go,” or “Go forth,” or “Get yourself out.” The rabbis noticed long ago that the second word is strange and unnecessary. God could have said “go.” Instead God says “go, to yourself,” or “go, for yourself,” or, as some have rendered it, “go into yourself.”

What follows is that Abraham leaves everything: his country and kindred. He does not know where he is going. He is promised a blessing that will not be fulfilled in his lifetime. And it all begins with that one person hearing the word “go toward yourself.”

I do not think it is a stretch to hear that word spoken to every person who has ever stood at the edge of the closet door. Your country, your kindred, your parents’ house: those are exactly the things the closet was built to keep. Leaving them, or risking them, in order to walk toward the self you actually are, is an Abrahamic thing to do. It is faith, that is, real trust. Getting up and moving forward when you don’t know where the road ultimately leads.

And the promise is the same. Not that it will be easy. That it will be a blessing, and that others will be blessed through you. Everyone who comes out lights the way for someone still inside. That is the lineage. That is what the Queer Christ, coming out of oppression’s

tomb, has been saying in our Easter narratives and in our hearts: the stone is rolled away. Walk toward yourself. Come out.

Chapter 3: Truth, Not Facts

Is the Bible Just a Bunch of Fairy Tales?

I am often asked if the Bible is "just" a bunch of fairy tales. For a lover of stories, the word "just" seems misplaced.

Religion is mythological. Myths are meant to help us get at truth, not facts. Myths are the imaginative explanations we form until better explanations based on evidence can be offered.

Bible stories, for me, are allegories for life. I couldn't care less if anything in the Bible ever literally, factually happened, because in my experience, what the stories are trying to communicate are true, timeless, and relevant for my life.

I'm Joseph. I'm Jacob. I'm Mary. I'm Elizabeth. I'm Miriam. I'm Aaron. I'm Elijah. I'm Amos. I'm the serpent. I'm Eve. I'm Noah. I'm Peter. I'm Paul. I'm Stephen. Each story shows me who I am, or who I have been, or who I can be. Each story shows mistakes I've made or am likely to make. Each story shows me that redemption is possible, that I am more than what I currently know and more than what I've done so far. So, they are true for me, even if they are not factual (and many of them are not).

Remember the famous editorial in the 1897 Sun answering the question "Is there a Santa Claus?" When "Virginia" asks if Santa is real, the writer explains that what Santa represents (hope, generosity, kindness, goodwill, etc.) is very real and very much needed. "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus" is the most remembered line from that piece. There isn't a man living at the North Pole, flying with magic reindeer tossing presents under trees, but there is a human urge and need to care for others, to express love, to be generous. We need, and in our best moments believe in, everything Santa is supposed to be. So, Santa is true, while not being factual. Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus.

What the Bible Is

Before we talk about how to read it, it helps to be clear about what the Bible is, because most of the trouble people have with the Bible comes from a mistaken idea of what kind of thing they are holding.

It is not a book. It is a library. The word "Bible" comes from the Greek ta biblia, "the books," plural, and the plural is the whole point. Between the covers of what we call the

Bible are sixty-six to eighty-eight documents (yes, there are multiple Christian canons…the one I am most familiar with consists of 73, the Roman Catholic Bible). The documents were written over centuries by dozens of authors, most of them anonymous, in three languages, on two continents, in every genre the ancient world knew. There are law codes and love poems. There are court histories and folk tales. There are hymns, proverbs, prophetic oracles, apocalyptic visions, letters, genealogies, short stories, and a handful of what the ancient world called "lives" of heroes. To ask "what does the Bible say about X" is a bit like asking what the public library says about X. It depends on which shelf you're standing in front of.

Nor did it arrive as a unit. The Hebrew scriptures came together slowly over centuries, and the boundaries were still being discussed in the early Christian period. The New Testament took even longer. The earliest documents in it are Paul's letters, written in the 50s. The gospels come later, Mark around the year 70, Matthew in the 80s, John in the late 90s, and Luke, according recent scholarship, sometime between 90 and 120 CE. For the first few centuries there was no agreed list of which Christian writings counted. Different churches used different collections. The first surviving list that matches our twenty-seven books appears in a letter from Athanasius of Alexandria in the year 367, more than three hundred years after Jesus. The canon was not handed down. It was argued out.

And it is not univocal. This is the thing that fundamentalism most needs to be false, and it is the thing most obviously true to anyone who reads the whole library rather than the verses on the church sign. The Bible contains two creation stories that contradict each other in their order of events and various details: were our origins a cosmic ocean or a garden? Were we made in the divine image or from clay enlivened with divine breath? Was there or wasn't there a chatty snake involved? Were woman and man created simultaneously out of nothing, or did the man come first and the woman "birthed" from his side? And if the mythical first woman was given life from a man without the contribution of a woman, was she then intersex? These questions are fun for me but what they mostly demonstrate is multivocality and non-literal history.

The Bible contains a book, Job, influenced by Babylonian and Canaanite stories, that disagrees with the pithy sayings of the book of Proverbs. The Bible contains Ecclesiastes, whose author isn't sure there is any point to anything, it finds itself next to Psalms, whose authors are sure of most things. It contains four gospels that tell the story of Jesus differently, sometimes irreconcilably: the birth stories in Matthew and Luke cannot both be true as written, and the day of the crucifixion differs between John and the other three. It contains Paul saying that in Christ there is no male and female, and a later letter in Paul's name saying women must not be allowed to teach in churches.

The Bible is not univocal. It is a conversation, sometimes an argument, carried on across centuries by people who did not always agree, none of whom expected their words to land in anything resembling a sacred canon. That is not problematic; it is what makes the bible a living thing.

Jesus Seminar scholar Marcus Borg said there are three phases to faith development:

1. **Pre-critical.** They sold it, we bought it. We accept the stories as they are, taking them as literal facts with no need to question them. This is how we start out.
2. **Critical.** Things don't make sense and we have a lot of questions. We start to not believe some of the stories. Walking on water? Lazarus coming to life after four days of decomposition? Abraham willing to slaughter his son? People in the desert being cured of snake venom by looking at a serpentine tchotchke?

At the critical level, we deconstruct, we doubt, we may even decide that a lot of it isn't true (or at least, not factual).

Most people get stuck at the first or second level. But Borg says there's an important third level. We have to go through 1 and 2 to get to 3, but 3 is the goal.

3. **Post-critical.** That's where we reclaim the stories and find new meaning and relevance in them. We reconstruct. We don't take the stories literally, but we no longer need to toss them out entirely. We read them and breathe new life into them and let them be free of the bondage of literalism; they become alive for us and fresh and exciting.

Inspired, Not Dictated

Somewhere in the critical phase, people usually hit the word "inspired" and stop. If the Bible isn't literally, factually true, they ask, then in what sense is it inspired? And if it isn't inspired, why bother with it?

I think the word has been asked to carry a meaning it was never meant to carry.

The idea that the Bible was dictated by God, word for word, with the human authors serving as something like stenographers, is not very old and was never the view of the whole church. It hardens into a doctrine mainly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in reaction to modern scholarship, and it produces a Bible that has to be defended against every archaeological dig and every carbon-dated manuscript. It is a fragile Bible. One talking donkey and the whole thing comes down.

The older and broader Christian view is that inspiration works the way it works everywhere else. We say a poem is inspired. We say a musician played an inspired set. We say a friend gave us an inspired idea. We do not mean that the poem was dictated or that the musician's fingers were moved by a force outside her. We mean that something in the

work is greater than its maker knew how to produce on purpose. Something breathed through them.

That is the Bible I love. Its authors were not stenographers. They were people, frightened and hopeful and sometimes wrong, trying to say what it felt like to be alive in front of the Mystery. Sometimes they got it right, so right that their words still cut millennia later. Sometimes they got it badly wrong: they never questioned slavery, they subordinated women, they made God the general of their wars. They were inspired in the way all honest seekers are inspired, which is intermittently, and in the middle of everything else they were.

An inspired Bible in that sense does not need to be defended. It needs to be read. It is not a crystal ball to be consulted for answers but a conversation to be joined, and joining it means bringing everything we have learned since, including the things the biblical writers could not have known.

Sometimes people fear that expanding their understanding of and relationship to the Bible is akin to giving up on God. (1) Don't worry about that. (2) We all give up old notions of God as we grow. We've all cast upon the garbage heap of life the old gods (or understandings of the divine) that no longer serve us. Meister Eckhart wrote, "I pray God to make me free of God."

When God is presence and power, goodness and possibility rather than a person (with personality quirks), that may not be abandoning God as much as simply letting God be bigger for us, beyond description and images. Graven images of God are too limiting; that's why the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments discourages us from having them.

And what of the biblical Jesus? Was he a prophet? A teacher? Philosopher? Rebel? Social activist? Healer? Miracle worker? Revolutionary? Messiah? Divine being? Someone who lived so authentically into his humanity that people thought he must be something more?

Jesus himself asks the important question: "Who do YOU say that I am?" Following Jesus, in my view, will include seeing Jesus differently over time. Relationships grow and evolve. If Jesus is going to have a primary place in my consciousness, then my understanding of him will probably change over time. I don't think we can get it wrong really, unless we stop trying.

No wonder one is to work out one's own salvation "with fear and trembling" (St. Paul). It is a lot of work, and every question leads to more questions, and every answer must eventually be discarded or replaced or upgraded. But that's the journey. Doubting and questioning, wrestling and wondering, that's the gig! And that's what we see in scripture: people working out their stuff and sharing their journey in literary, symbolic, allegorical,

metaphorical, mystical, mythical, tragic, comedic, political, ritualistic, poetic, clumsy, smooth, and courageous ways.

Even if the characters aren't real (and honestly, some aren't), the writers certainly were real, and the writers are using their characters to tell their stories, and when we read and question them, we are adding our own. That's the magic of scripture. The sacred stories include us and are therefore meaningful and even true, whether or not they happened.

Three Questions to Ask Any Text

The post-critical reader is not a passive reader. Reclaiming a story is work, and it helps to have tools. Here are the three questions I bring to any biblical text, whether I am preparing a homily or reading in the morning with a cup of coffee.

First: who wrote this, to whom, and why? Every text in the Bible was written by someone, for someone, in response to something. Paul did not write "Romans" to twenty-first-century Americans. He wrote it to a house church in the capital of the empire, a mix of Jewish and Gentile believers who were fighting about food and circumcision, and he wrote it to prepare the ground for a visit. Leviticus was not written to Christians. It was written to an ancient priestly community working out how to be faithful in a specific place and time. Knowing this does not make the text irrelevant. It makes it readable.

Second: what kind of writing is this? A parable is not a news report. A psalm is not a law. An apocalypse is not a prediction; it is coded protest literature written under persecution, and reading Revelation as a timeline of future events is like reading Animal Farm as a guide to livestock management.

Genesis 1 is a liturgical poem with a refrain. Jonah is a comedic performance piece challenging xenophobia (and it includes a reluctant prophet spending half a week in a fish before ending up in "Fish City" - Nineveh, named for the Fish god, Ninos).

Asking "did this happen" of a text that was never trying to report an event is a category mistake, and it is the mistake that keeps most people stuck at Borg's second stage.

Third: does this reading produce love? This is the question Jesus gave us. When asked which commandment was greatest, he said love God and love your neighbor, and that the whole of the scripture he knew (The Torah and the Prophets) hangs on those two. Augustine, sixteen hundred years ago, drew the consequence: any interpretation of scripture that does not build up the love of God and neighbor has not understood the scripture, however clever it is. This is the test. If a reading of a text produces cruelty, exclusion, contempt, or fear, the reading is wrong, whatever the words on the page seem to say. If a reading produces compassion, justice, welcome, and courage, it is on the right

track. The Bible's own center of gravity is love, and readings that pull away from that center are pulling away from the Bible.

Those three questions will not answer everything. But they will keep you from the two errors that ruin most Bible reading: taking it as a fact book, and throwing it away because it isn't.

Those of us who free ourselves of literalism find the Bible to be new and refreshing, offering something powerful with each new reading. It's a conversation rather than a crystal ball, an open door rather than a locked one.

So, there was probably no global flood (and certainly not a floating zoo of every land creature on the planet). Jonah probably didn't spend three days in a fish and hopefully didn't value a gourd more than the people of Nineveh (though the story says he wept for the dead plant and was sad that Ninevites weren't destroyed). Snakes and donkeys do not talk and never have. Miraculous births may be about something other than biology and are not unique to our sacred texts. And Easter may be more about resurrecting hope in our lives than about a single moment in history. AND none of that changes the truth that I find as I engage these stories: truth that is applicable to my life, my journey, my faith.

Chapter 4: There's Not a Spot Where God Is Not

If you spend a few Sundays at Sunshine Cathedral you will hear the word "omnipresence" more than you have heard it in your entire life up to that point. Sometimes it is used as a name: "the omnipresence" instead of "God." Sometimes it comes as a rhyme, the one people learn first and repeat longest: there's not a spot where God is not. Sometimes it is the whole homily, and sometimes it is one line at the end. But it is always there, because it is the idea upon which the rest of our theology is built.

Other churches have a central doctrine, too, even if they don't call it that. For some it is the atonement: Christ died for your sins, and everything else follows from that. For some it is biblical inerrancy. For some it is the sovereignty of God, or Jesus' real presence in the Eucharist, or the baptism of the holy Spirit. For us at Sunshine Cathedral it is this: God is everywhere, fully, evenly present as the substance of all that is; therefore, you are part of it, forever.

I want to spend a chapter on that, because it sounds simple and yet it is also complex. Most people, if you ask them, will say of course God is everywhere. But very few of them believe it, and almost none of them have followed the notion to where it naturally goes.

The Old Idea

Omnipresence is not a New Thought invention, though New Thought is where we learned to take it seriously.

The 139th psalm is the classic text. “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me.” The psalmist tries every direction: up, down, east, west, into the dark. There is nowhere that is not God’s place. Notice that Sheol is included. The land of the dead, the place the Hebrew imagination reserved for the absence of everything, is not empty of God either.

Paul, speaking in Athens to an audience of philosophers, quotes one of their own poets back at them: in God “we live and move and have our being.” Not near God. Not under God. In. The image is similar to a fish asking where the water is.

Then there are the mystics who took the idea and went all the way with it.

Meister Eckhart, the fourteenth-century Dominican who was tried for heresy and died before the verdict came in, preached that “the eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me.” He said the ground of the soul and the ground of God are one ground. He prayed to be rid of God, meaning rid of every image and name that made God small enough to hold. Behind all the names, he said, is what he called the Godhead: not a being, not a person, but the nothingness out of which everything comes and in which everything exists.

Baruch Spinoza, three centuries later, was expelled from his synagogue in Amsterdam for saying, in the language of philosophy, something close to what Eckhart had said in the language of prayer. God is not a being outside the universe who made it and watches it. God is the one substance of which everything is a mode. *Deus sive Natura: God, or Nature*, the same thing under two names. When Einstein was asked whether he believed in God, he said he believed in Spinoza’s God, a God who is revealed in the lawful harmony of what exists, not a God deciding what happens in each life.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, trained at Harvard for the Unitarian ministry, wrote in 1841 of the Over-Soul, “that Unity within which every [person’s] particular being is contained and made one with all other.” He said that the world we see is God made visible, and that there is a spirit in each of us that is not ours alone. The New Thought movement, which was just beginning, read Emerson the way earlier generations read Augustine.

And Paul Tillich, the twentieth century’s most influential Protestant theologian, said the thing that shocks people when they first hear it: God does not exist. He meant it precisely. To exist is to be one thing among other things, a being among beings, however large. God is not that. God is the ground of being, the power to be, that in which all things

that exist participate. Tillich said that to argue for the existence of God is already to have lost because it treats God as an item in the inventory of the universe. God is not in the inventory. God is what the inventory rests on.

This is a lineage. Eckhart, Spinoza, Emerson, Tillich, and a good many others (Bruno, George Berkeley, Hegel, Mordacai Kaplan, Thich Nhat Hanh) who never met and mostly did not read each other, all arriving at the same place from different roads. God is not something; God simply is…God is isness.

The Statement of Being

New Thought took that idea, which had lived mostly in the seminars of philosophers and the cells of mystics, and put it in the hands of ordinary people who needed it to work on a Tuesday.

Daisy Baum's Studies in Divine Science, published in 1909, states it in four sentences, and we still embrace them:

> "There is but one All. This one that is All is the living presence of God everywhere. This all-inclusive One is Love, Life, Wisdom, and Power. I am in and a part of this Presence now."

Fannie James, another of the Divine Science pioneers, put it this way in the Statement of Being that Divine Science students still learn:

> "God is all, both invisible and visible. One Presence, One Mind, One Power is All. This One that is all is perfect life, perfect love and perfect substance. I am the individual expression of God and am ever one with this perfect life, perfect love and perfect substance."

Read those side by side with Eckhart and Tillich and you will see it is the same claim. What is different is the last sentence. The philosophers say God is the ground of being. The Divine Science teachers remind us that all beings share this ground of being, that includes you and it includes me. There's not a spot where God is not suggests that God is in you, you are part of God, you are one of the ways that the universe knows itself, you are to God as the wave is to the ocean. The wave is the ocean waving; you and I are God godding.

An omnipresence that stays in the abstract is a curiosity. An omnipresence you are standing in (and that is flowing through and expressing as you) is a life.

In the theology of omnipresence, Jesus is an example, not an exception. Jesus is divine love made manifest in human experience, and so are we. The difference is that Jesus (or at least our mythologized version of Jesus) knew it, and we see that truth in him. Now, following Jesus' example, we try to see that same truth in ourselves. As much as Jesus was,

we are each the child of God, an extension of God, a drop in the ocean with all that the ocean is also in the drop.

What It Does to Fear

Take the doctrine seriously for a moment and watch what happens to fear.

Fear-based religion depends on distance. God is up there; you are down here. God is holy; you are not. There is a gap, and the gap is the problem, and religion exists to manage the gap. Sacrifices, priests, rituals, the right beliefs, the right behavior, the right prayer said the right way: all of it is the machinery for getting across, or at least for keeping God from noticing how far away you are. And the machinery runs on fear, because the gap can always widen. One wrong step and you are out of reach.

Now suppose there is no gap. That is the New Thought understanding of atonement, not that there is a gap that rites or texts or a savior is meant to bridge, but the awareness that there is no gap and can be no gap in omnipresence. Atonement then is simply the reminder of At-One-Ment. The one substance, the one presence is omnipresent and if that is true that gaps and distances and being “lost” are simply not possible.

Suppose God is not up there but here, not holy in the sense of separate but holy in the sense of whole, present at every point including the point where you are. Then there is nothing to cross. The machinery has nothing to do. You cannot be out of reach because there is no out. The psalmist tried heaven and Sheol and the far side of the sea, and God was in all of them.

New Thought says there never was a gap, only the belief in one, and the good news is the discovery that the belief was mistaken. Jesus did not build a bridge. He told us there was no gap between this side and the other…in fact, there are no sides, no there, no other, no over yonder. There is only here, only now, only life, only ultimate reality. There is no distance in omnipresence…there is only presence and nothing is outside of it.

I have watched this land on people. Someone who has spent forty years believing that God was disappointed in them, that they were one sin away from being cast out, that the people who threw them out of church were doing God’s work: you can watch the moment when “there’s not a spot where God is not” finally gets through. It is not that they suddenly believe God loves them. It is that they realize God could not have been anywhere else. Love was never the question. Presence was never the question. The only question was whether they would notice.

What It Does to Prayer

If God is everywhere, prayer cannot be what most people were taught it is.

The model most of us grew up with is petition: you have a need, you tell God about it, and God, who is somewhere else and has other things to attend to, decides whether to do something. In that model prayer is a kind of mail. You send it off and hope it arrives, and if nothing changes you wonder whether you addressed it correctly or whether the recipient was in a bad mood.

But you cannot send mail to someone who is in you, who ultimately is you. Obviously you are not all of God, but all that you are is God-stuff. That doesn't mean you don't make mistakes, misunderstand things, feel separation from time to time (even if it isn't really possible); but, it does mean that you are in micro what the divine is in macro, just as the drop is in micro what the ocean is in macro.

There is nowhere to send a prayer, a wish, an intention. The everywhere-God is present at the need, in your awareness of the need. In the theology of omnipresence God isn't a person who needs to notice or be persuaded to care. Your noticing is God's noticing, your care is divine care.

So prayer has to be something else. In New Thought it is remembering. It is the act of bringing your own awareness into line with what is already true: that the Presence is here, that you are part of it, that it is Love, Life, Wisdom, and Power, and that those are available now. Prayer is not asking God to show up. It is showing up yourself, to the God who never left.

That is why our prayers at Sunshine Cathedral are affirmative. We do not say "God, please be with us." We say "God is with us." We are not informing God of something. We are informing ourselves. And the change that follows is real, but it is a change in the one praying: fear dissolves, perception shifts, a way opens that was there all along but could not be seen through the fog. Chapter 21 goes into the practice of this in detail. For now the point is simply that omnipresence rewrites what and why prayer is.

What It Does to Death

Return to the psalmist for a moment: "If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there."

Most religion is, at bottom, an attempt to deal with the fear of death, and most of it deals with death by drawing a map. A pleasant place is where you go if you are good or if you are a member of the right group or if you disapprove of the "wrong" people or if you say you believe the "right" things. A horrific place is where you go otherwise.

There is a presumed gate, judge, ledger. The maps differ, but they share an assumption: that death is a departure, a going somewhere, and that where you go depends on how well you abided by the rules.

Omnipresence does not draw a map, because there is nowhere to go. If God is the ground of being, and you have been in God every moment of your life, then death is not a

departure from God. It cannot be. There is no place that is outside the One that is All, and Sheol is on the psalmist's list.

I do not know what death is like. Nobody does, and I distrust anyone who claims to. Most in New Thought agree that life is endless but hold many different pictures of what that might mean, and I am content to hold the question open. What I do know is that wherever death takes us, it cannot take us out of the divine Presence, because the Presence has no outside. "Underneath are the everlasting arms," Deuteronomy says, and the point of the image is that there is no falling out of them. That is not a map. It is better than a map. It is the assurance that there is nowhere on the map that God is not.

This is what I say at funerals, and it is what I say to people who are afraid of dying, and it is what I will want said to me. Not an assurance of a place, but a reminder that there is no place outside of God and in this incarnation and in whatever state might be next, I will always be in and a part of the divine presence.

What It Does to One Another

There is one more consequence, and it is the one that makes omnipresence an ethic rather than a comfort.

If there is not a spot where God is not, then there is not a person in whom God is not.

Not the person you love. Not the person you cannot stand. Not the person who put you in the closet, and not the person you would like to put there. Not the stranger, the immigrant, the addict, the prisoner, the one whose politics make you sick. The Presence is in all of them, fully, the way it is in you. Eckhart's ground of existence is not a private possession. Everyone has it. Everyone is it.

That is why Jesus can say that whatever you do to the least of these you do to him. He is not being poetic. He is describing the structure of reality. The Christ is present in the hungry person the way the Presence is present everywhere, and to feed her is to feed the Presence, and to turn her away is to deny the presence.

This is also why an everywhere-God cannot belong to anyone. Every religion that has ever tried to make God its property, to say God is with us and not with them, God is in our temple and not theirs, God speaks our language and blesses our army and hates the people we hate, has been wrong in exactly the same way: it has tried to draw a boundary around something that has no boundary. Beings have boundaries, Being does not. You can fence a field. You cannot fence the air. The moment you say "God is here and not there," you have stopped talking about God and started talking about your fence.

Sunshine Cathedral was born among people who had been fenced out. That may be why omnipresence took root here the way it did. We were told God was on the other side

of a wall, and we discovered there was no wall, and once you have discovered that you cannot build one for anybody else.

Einstein's Testimony

Back to Einstein, who believed in Spinoza's God but not in a God who is concerned with human affairs.

I think he was right that God is probably not a person who watches from outside and decides whether to intervene. He did, nevertheless, have a sense of awe before the vast universe, the complexities of science, and even the mysteries that remain as such until they can be fully understood. His understanding of God/Nature/the Universe wasn't necessarily cold; he himself had a strong sense of ethics, concern for his fellow human-beings, and a deep reverence for the All (whether or not he attributed sacredness to it). He may not have reached the understanding held by Eckhart and Tillich and Baum that the One is not a person but it can seem personal because it is Love, pure love, unconditional love. Not a loving Someone, but the power of love that leaves no one out. When one experiences or shares love, one is having communion with It and that seems very personal indeed. Is that love Conscious? Some will guess yes and others will guess no. I lean toward "yes" but honestly, I do not know. Einstein believed in one-all and he believed in love. Were they the same for him? I don't know. But, in matters of faith, there must be room for the unknown, or at least the not yet known. Faith and empiricism have a long, complicated, and sometimes contentious relationship.

The everywhere-God does not concern itself with human beings the way a manager concerns herself with employees, checking in, keeping score. It concerns itself with human beings the way the ocean concerns itself with a wave: by being what the wave is made of, all the way through, with nothing held back. Did Einstein share this understanding? I'm not sure, but it is currently my understanding.

There's not a spot where God is not. Say it over and over. "Faith comes by hearing…" All the yucky stuff you believe about yourself is because you heard it until you accepted it as true. The one sure way to hear good things is to say them, and we can say them until we accept them as true. There's not a spot where God is not…and you are one of the God-filled spots.

Chapter 5: Justice-Love and the Kin-dom

Every theology has a center and an edge. The center is what it believes about God. The edge is what it does about it. A theology that is all center and no edge is a philosophy. A

theology that is all edge and no center is a political movement. Sunshine Theology's center is omnipresence. Its edge is what we call justice-love.

You will hear the phrase constantly: justice-love. It is not a mere slogan. It is the answer to a question the last chapter raised. If God is everywhere and in everyone, what follows? What does a person do, what does a church do, who actually believes there is not a spot where God is not?

The answer is justice-love, and it takes a little explaining.

Why One Word

Love and justice are usually kept in separate rooms.

Love is private. It is what happens between individuals: partners, parents and children, friends, a person and their pet, a person and their God. It is warm and particular. It looks at one face at a time.

Justice is public. It is what happens between groups: classes, races, nations, the powerful and the powerless. It is cool and general. It looks at systems, laws, and distributions. In most religious thought, love is the church's business and justice is the state's, and the church's contribution to justice is to produce loving individuals who will, one hopes, participate ethically in systems of governance.

The trouble is that the two rooms have a door between them, and it only opens one way. Love without justice becomes sentiment: the slaveholder who was kind to enslaved persons (other than enslaving them, of course), the husband who loves his wife but controls all the money, the church that welcomes gay people warmly until they want to be ordained, married, or serve on the board. The love feels real but it changes very little in the world because the structure it lives inside was never questioned. And justice without love becomes machinery: the bureaucrat who administers the correct policy to people whose faces she never sees, the activist who loves the cause and despises the people, the revolution that believes freedom comes only from cruelty.

Justice-love is the refusal to keep them separate. It is love that has learned to see systems, and justice that has not forgotten faces. It is what Jesus was doing when he healed a leper (love, one face) and then told him to go show himself to the priest (justice, a challenge to the system that had cast him out). It is what the prophets meant when they said God is not interested in your festivals and your sacrifices while the poor are being crushed at the gate. Amos does not say God wants either love or justice. He says let justice roll down like water, and it is the love of God that is doing the rolling.

The Bible, read whole, does not have a private love and a public justice. It has one thing, which it calls by different names depending on the shelf: hesed, steadfast love; tzedakah, righteousness that is also the word for charity; agape, the love that Paul says is patient and

kind and also the love that Jesus says lays down its life. Justice-love is our attempt to say that one thing in English.

The Test

How do you know whether a theology, a church, a policy, a life, has justice-love in it? Jesus gave the test, and it is the same one I named in chapter 2, because it is the only one he gave.

I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave water. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was insufficiently clothed and you helped me be more comfortable. I was sick and you cared for me. I was in prison and you visited me. Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me.

Notice what is not on the list. Not "I was in error and you corrected me." Not "I was a sinner and you told me so." Not "I was outside the faith and you brought me in." Not one item on the list is about belief, doctrine, worship, or morality as it is usually meant. Every item is about a body in need and what was done for it.

The story of wealthy Dives and poor Lazarus drives home this same point. Dives apparently cared about his family, but was unconcerned about the sick and hungry right outside his home. He is condemned by the story writer not for his theology or religious affiliation but for his lack of concern for those who suffer. Justice-Love tries to ease suffering while challenging systems that create and perpetuate suffering.

This is the test we apply at Sunshine Cathedral, and it cuts in every direction. It cuts against the fundamentalist church that preaches hellfire and runs no food pantry. It cuts against the progressive church that has all the right positions and never visits anyone in jail. It cuts against us, whenever we get more interested in being right than in kind or generous. The least of these do not care what you believe about the Bible or the afterlife or how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. They care whether you showed up.

And the test has a second half, less quoted. The ones who failed were not all cruel. Some failed because they did not pay attention. "Lord, when did we see you hungry?" They walked past the hungry person every day and never once connected her to anything that mattered. Their theology had a center and no edge. They "believed in" Jesus and could not find him in the one place he said he would be.

St. John Chrysostom famously said, "If you cannot find Christ in the beggar at the church door, you will not find Christ in the chalice."

Justice-love is, before anything else, a way of seeing. It is the trained habit of looking at the person most in need and recognizing who is there.

Why Kin-dom

Jesus' phrase for what he was announcing was basileia tou theou, the empire of God, usually rendered "kingdom of God." He used it constantly. It was the content of his preaching. And at Sunshine Cathedral, when we quote him, we say "kin-dom."

People sometimes think this is squeamishness about a masculine word. It's not just that. The change was made by the mujerista theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz, who credited it to a Franciscan friend, and the reason was theological before it was linguistic.

A kingdom has a king. It has a throne, a hierarchy, subjects, borders, and an army to defend them. It is exactly the structure Jesus spent his ministry undercutting. When his disciples argued about who would be greatest, he put a child in front of them. When James and John asked for seats at his right and left, he said the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, but it shall not be so among you. When Pilate asked if he was a king, he said his realm was not of this world, meaning not of this kind. To translate his central phrase with the word for the very thing he was rejecting is a strange choice, and it has done a great deal of damage. For most of Christian history, "kingdom of God" has been read as a blueprint for Christian kings.

A kin-dom has no king. It has kin. It is the family of God with no one at the top and no one outside. It is what Jesus was pointing at when he called God Abba, when he called his followers brothers and sisters, when he said whoever does the will of God is my mother and my brother. It is the vision of Isaiah, where the wolf lies down with the lamb, and of Luke who wrote that in the early Jesus movement no one was in need because everyone shared. It is the beloved community Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached.

Jesus' "basileia" was a counter kingdom, a non-empire, and egalitarian and utopian vision of loving community, fairness, and equity. He used "basileia" ironically, stating that God's way is very different from the ways of empire.

And the kin-dom is at hand, in our hands. We are able to keep the dream alive and we can work to dream the dream into reality. Jesus' divine borderless nation where all are welcome and loved and treated fairly is not in the sky, not after death, not when the right people are in power. Here, now, wherever people begin to treat each other as kin. The kin-dom is not a place we are going. It is a way of being together that we can start at any moment, and every time we do, a little more of it exists.

The Three-Pronged Gospel

Sunshine Cathedral came out of the Metropolitan Community Churches, and MCC came out of a living room.

In October of 1968, Troy Perry, a Pentecostal preacher who had been thrown out of his denomination for being gay, held a worship service in his home in Los Angeles. Twelve people came. Some of them were there because they had nowhere else to go. Most churches in 1968 would not have let them through the door, and the ones that would have let them in would have spent the hour telling them what was wrong with them. Perry told them God loved them as they were. It was, at the time, a radical thing for a Christian minister to say, and he said it, and MCC grew from that living room into a worldwide fellowship.

Perry summarized what MCC was for in what he called the three-pronged gospel, and Sunshine Cathedral still holds it:

Christian Liberation: being saved from hopelessness, degradation, and despair. Not saved from hell. Saved from the hell people were already living in, the one that fear-based religion had built for them.

Christian Community: a church modeled on the healing love Jesus showed, inclusive of those who call themselves Christian and those who do not. A place to belong before you believe anything.

Christian Social Action: justice work to build the kin-dom of God on earth. Not as an add-on to the gospel. As the gospel.

Look at those three and you will see justice-love from three angles. Liberation is what justice-love does to the person. Community is what justice-love does to the church. Social action is what justice-love does to the world. They are not three programs. They are one thing, which is what happens when people who have been told they are outside discover there is no outside, and turn around to tell everyone else.

What Justice-Love Asks of a Congregation

It is easy to talk about justice-love as though it were a virtue for individuals. It is that. But a church is not a collection of individuals, and the test in Matthew 25 is addressed to nations. So it is fair to ask what justice-love asks of Sunshine Cathedral as a body, and I will try to answer plainly.

Justice-love asks us to feed people. The food pantry is not a side ministry. It is the gospel with a loading dock. Tens of thousands of people a year eat because of it, and most of them will never attend a service, and that is exactly as it should be. The least of these were not asked for their church membership.

Justice-love asks us to house people, or at least to give them somewhere to land. Sunshine Pride House is a ministry of Sunshine Cathedral that offers a safe landing spot to up to LGBTQ young adults under 25 at a time. Sunshine Cathedral owns and offers the

property, clinical services are provided by a local social services agency, and the program is funded by grants and individual gifts which the Our Fund Foundation, a local LGBTQ philanthropy agency, helps secure. Clients may be there for 2 weeks or 3 months, and when they leave they will have connections, referrals, opportunities, will have developed life skills, received counseling and life-coaching, and usually will leave as a college student or an employed.

Justice-love asks us to stand where Christ is standing. When a law is passed that targets trans children, when a book is pulled from a library, when someone is killed for who they are, the church that embraces the gospel does not issue a statement about civility. It goes to the place where the crucifixion is happening and says so out loud. Our commitment to what we call Global Human Rights is not a political position. It is where we think Jesus is.

It asks us to be a church that people can walk into without being harmed. This sounds like a low bar. It is not. Most of the people who come through our doors have been harmed in a church before, and the first act of justice-love toward them is to make sure it does not happen again. Expansive language, open Communion, no doctrinal test, no threats: these are not liberal niceties. They are the minimum conditions for a person to be safe in the presence of God's people, and the church has failed at them for a very long time.

And it asks us to keep our own house. A church can preach justice-love and run itself on fear: fear of the budget, fear of church leaders, fear of the members who give the most, fear of members who threaten to leave if their preferences are not prioritized. Justice-love begins at home, in how staff are treated, how decisions are made, how disagreements are handled, how power is shared. If the kin-dom is not visible in the way we work and worship, it will not be visible in the way we run a protest.

Love Is the Litmus Test

I will end where the Pridetide essays end, because it is the same point.

In the Bible we find exhortations to welcome strangers, be good neighbors, forgive one another, care for the vulnerable, pray for others (including those who are unkind to us), treat others as we would wish to be treated, not judge others unfairly, live humbly, show mercy, and work for justice. All of these are demonstrations of love. Jesus said his followers could be identified by their loving actions. He said love was the greatest of all commandments. Paul said that without it, everything else, prophecy, knowledge, faith enough to move mountains, was a noisy gong.

Love is the biblical litmus test for what is holy. Justice-love is our name for what that love looks like when it walks out of the sanctuary and into the world. And the kin-dom is what the world starts to look like when enough people do.

Chapter 6: God's Miracle, Not God's Mistake

Every congregation has a sentence. Sometimes it is a verse; sometimes it is a line from a hymn; sometimes it is something the founding pastor said once that no one can stop saying. It is the sentence that gets printed on the banner and the coffee mug, the one that visitors remember when they have forgotten everything else, the one that members say to each other at the hospital bedside when there is nothing else to say.

Ours is: *you are God's miracle and not God's mistake*.

I have said it at the end of homilies for years. It is on our marketing materials. It is in this book's introduction and it will be the last line of the book. I want to spend a chapter on it, because a sentence that gets said that often can turn into wallpaper, and this one is not wallpaper. It is a doctrine. Specifically, it is our doctrine of the human being: what theology calls anthropology, the account of what a person is.

The Doctrine of the Mistake

To understand why we say it, you have to understand what it is answering.

A great deal of Christian theology has taught, in one form or another, that the human being is a mistake. Not in those words. In those words it would sound as bad as it is. But the doctrine of original sin, in its harder versions, says that every person is born corrupt, that the corruption reaches all the way down, that nothing in us is capable of good without a rescue from outside, and that the natural state of a human being before God is condemnation. Calvin called it total depravity. Others softened the language and kept the idea.

Now take that doctrine and hand it to a fifteen-year-old who has just realized she is a lesbian.

She has already been told that people are born broken. Now she is told that she is more broken than most. Her particular corruption has a name and a verse. The church that taught her about original sin is now telling her that her very desire, the thing in her that reaches toward love, is the proof of her depravity. And there is no rescue for this one, or the rescue requires that she stop being who she is. She is, in the most literal sense the doctrine allows, a mistake.

I have met that fifteen-year-old hundreds of times. She is forty now, or sixty, or seventy-five, and she walked into Sunshine Cathedral because someone told her it was different, and she is bracing for the moment when it turns out not to be. Everything she was taught about God is organized around the idea that she should not exist as she is. And the first

thing our theology has to do, before it can do anything else, is to say clearly, and keep saying: no. You are not the mistake. The doctrine was the mistake.

What Genesis Actually Says

The Bible's first account of the human being is not that we are broken. It is that we are very good.

Genesis 1 is a liturgical poem with a refrain, and the refrain is "and God saw that it was good." Light: good. Sea and land: good. Plants, stars, fish, birds, animals: good, good, good, good, good. Then the human being is made, in the image of God, male and female, and the refrain changes. "God saw everything that had been made, and indeed, it was very good."

Very good. That is the first word the Bible says about us, and it is said before anything goes wrong. It is said about all of us: not the righteous, not the chosen, not the straight. The image of God is stamped on the whole species with no exceptions listed.

The psalmist picks it up: "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." Not fearfully and wonderfully made and then ruined. Made, wonderfully, and still that. Jesus picks it up when he tells his disciples that the hairs of their heads are numbered and that they are worth more than many sparrows. Paul picks it up, in one of his better moments, when he says nothing in all creation can separate us from divine love (I often say, "from the love that God is").

The doctrine of the mistake had to work hard to get around all that. It had to read Genesis 3 as cancelling Genesis 1. It had to read one bad afternoon in a garden as outweighing "very good." We decline to do that. We think the first word is the true word, and that everything that has been said since about human worthlessness is commentary, and bad commentary at that.

Miracle

So we say miracle. What do we mean?

We do not mean that you are a suspension of natural law. We mean something closer to what the word meant before it got tangled up with the supernatural: a thing to be wondered at. Miraculum, from mirari, to wonder. We define "miracle" specifically as "a change of perception from fear to love." That is Marianne Williamson's definition, based on the teachings of A Course in Miracles.

Consider what you actually are. You are a pattern of matter that has organized itself, over billions of years and through an unbroken chain of ancestors going back to the first cell, into something that can look at the stars and ask what they are. You are the universe, in one small place, having become aware of itself. You can love. You can grieve. You can

make a joke, and get one. You can forgive. You can decide, against every pressure of your environment and your history, to become a better version of yourself. No physicist or neurologist or theologian can explain exactly why any of that should be possible, and the ones who are honest say so.

In the Divine Science language, you are the individual expression of God. Not a copy. An expression, the way a word is an expression of a thought, or a note is an expression of a song. The infinite Presence, which has no shape of its own, takes a shape in you that it takes nowhere else. There has never been another one. There will not be another one. When we say you are God's miracle, we mean that you are one of the ways the omnipresence has chosen to be present, and that if you were not here, something of God would be missing from the world.

That is not flattery. It is what follows from omnipresence taken seriously, and it is true of the person you love least as much as it is true of you. But it is also true of you, and most of the people who need to hear it have never been told.

If you are a miracle, and not a mistake, then many of your fears will vanish. Certainly your fear of God or fear or unworthiness will begin to fade. You will learn to accept and celebrate and love yourself, and when you love yourself, you find more and more to love in others.

To see yourself as a miracle is a major change of perception and it starts a healing process that will bring hope and joy in abundance to your life. You are God's miracle, not God's mistake is our way of saying, to borrow from Ram Dass, that you are and everyone you meet is God in drag.

Healing the Hurts Caused by Hatred

Our missional affirmation says that Sunshine Cathedral is a spirit-seeking community healing the hurts caused by hatred. The phrase was chosen with care. Not the hurts caused by sin, or by ignorance, or by the world. By hatred.

Hatred is what happens when the doctrine of the mistake is turned outward. If some people are mistakes, then it is not only permissible to reject them, it is faithful. The hatred does not feel like hatred to the ones doing it. It feels like standing for righteousness. And it lands on the ones receiving it as a wound that goes to the center of the self: not you did something wrong, but you are something wrong.

That wound does not heal by argument. You cannot reason a person out of the belief that they are a mistake, because the belief was not installed by reasoning. It was installed by a thousand small rejections, a look on a mother's face, a silence at a dinner table, a sermon heard at an age when everything the preacher said was true by definition. It lives below the arguments.

What heals it is a community that treats you as very good, over and over, until the treatment sinks below the arguments too. That is what the applause is for. That is why we sing so much and why the songs are joyful. That is why Communion is open, why no one asks what you believe before they hand you the bread, why the language of the liturgy has been scrubbed of every phrase that ever made anyone feel like a category rather than a person. Every piece of it is treatment for the wound. We are not being nice. We are practicing spiritual medicine.

And it works. I have watched it work. Chapter 13 has the litany: I've seen people who had no self-esteem come to believe that they are indeed God's miracle. It does not happen in a week. It happens the way the wound was made, in a thousand small moments, going the other direction.

Go to Peace Instead of to Pieces

A mentor of mine, decades ago, used to say: you can go to peace instead of to pieces. It has stayed with me, and it has been part of my teaching for most of my pastoral career, because it is the practical side of the doctrine.

If you are a mistake, then going to pieces is the appropriate response to almost everything. Every setback confirms the verdict. Every criticism is a reminder. Every loss is what you had coming. The person who believes they are a mistake lives in a permanent state of low-grade emergency, waiting for the next piece of evidence, and when it comes, they fall apart, and the falling apart is itself more evidence.

If you are a miracle, the setbacks are still setbacks. Flights are still canceled. Loved ones still get sick. The world still seems crazy. But none of it is a verdict on you, because the verdict was already in, and it was "very good." You can look at the hard thing squarely, feel what there is to feel about it, and then, from a ground that the hard thing cannot reach, decide how to respond. That ground is peace. It is not the absence of trouble. It is the presence of the Presence, underneath the trouble, holding.

This is the whole of New Thought's practical teaching in one phrase. Our attitudes and habitual thoughts influence our experience of daily living. That does not necessarily mean you can think your way out of cancer or opt out of the suffering caused by an unjust law. It means that between the event and your response there is a space, and in that space you are free, and what you do with the freedom depends on what you believe you are. Miracles go to peace. Mistakes go to pieces. The events are the same. The ground is different.

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

I want to close with a teaching (called in antiquated language a “commandment”) that everyone knows and almost no one reads to the end.

Love your neighbor AS yourself. When I read that I hear, “love your neighbor as if she were yourself.” If God is our shared substance, our common reality, our source, then my neighbor is part of me, and I am part of her, and we are both expressions of the Divine. Love your neighbor AS yourself.

Jesus said it was the second-greatest commandment, inseparable from the first (love God). The church has spent two thousand years on the first five words and has mostly ignored the last two. But they are there, and they are load-bearing. You are to love your neighbor as yourself. The self-love is the measure. It is assumed. It is the thing the neighbor-love is supposed to be like.

A person who has been taught that they are a mistake cannot embrace that teaching, because they have nothing to measure with. Their neighbor-love, if it exists, is a kind of anxious service, offered from below, hoping to earn what they were told they did not deserve. It burns out. It curdles into resentment. Or it becomes the love of the doormat, which is not love at all.

But if I feel lovable, and I treat my neighbor as if she is as lovable (because we are both, as Emerson said, a part and parcel of God), then this great teaching is being embraced and carried out.

To love yourself is not vanity. In the structure of the commandment, it is the prerequisite for loving anyone. The fifteen-year-old who was told her desire was depravity has to learn to look at herself and see what God saw on the sixth day in that ancient parable, or she will never be able to look at anyone else that way either. And that learning is not self-indulgence. It is growth. It is the first half of the second-greatest commandment, the half the church forgot to teach.

You are God’s miracle and not God’s mistake. It is not a greeting card. It is Genesis 1, and Psalm 139, and Matthew 10, and Romans 8, and Jesus’ teaching on love, gathered into one sentence that a wounded person can hold. We say it in every homily because it is what we offer a homily at all.

Part Two: The Year of Love

Chapter 7: Advent: Waiting On, Not Waiting For

Advent is the first season of the Christian Year and begins four Sundays before Christmas.

Advent is sometimes called “Little Lent” because it is a time of preparation and waiting. During the four weeks of Advent, we are asked to worship weekly, pray daily, and engage in acts of generosity.

During Advent, we focus on the themes of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.

Advent begins the Christian year and is followed by Christmastide, Epiphany, Ordinary Time, Lent, Eastertide, Pentecost (and the Season After Pentecost, which begins with Trinity Sunday and lasts for several weeks), and Ordinary Time. At Sunshine Cathedral we add Pridetide (the month of June), and if Pentecost falls in Pridetide we celebrate it as Pentecost in Pridetide.

The liturgical cycles help us live our sacred stories and apply their lessons in our daily lives.

Why a Year?

Before we get to Advent itself, a word about why a church would organize its life around a calendar at all.

People come to Sunshine Cathedral from many backgrounds: Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Jewish, Unchurched, Muslim, Pentecostal, Evangelical, Quaker, Anglican, Lutheran, Black Church traditions, Latter Day Saints and more. Those who come to Sunshine Cathedral from evangelical or Pentecostal backgrounds have never kept a liturgical year. They had Christmas and Easter, and everything else was just Sunday. The seasons, the colors on the altar, the words “Advent” and “Epiphany” and “Ordinary Time” sound foreign.

Here is the reason we keep it. A story you hear once is information. A story you live through every year at the same time of the year the light is changing, becomes part of you. It gets into the body. Ask anyone who grew up with the liturgical year what late November feels like and they will tell you: it feels like waiting. Not because someone told them to wait but because thirty or fifty Advents have taught their bones what the season is for.

The Christian year is a way of rehearsing the whole gospel, from longing to birth to revelation to wilderness to death to new life to spirit to the long green season of growing,

every twelve months, so that by the time you have done it a few dozen times the shape of the story is the shape of your own life. That is what I mean when I say the cycles help us live our sacred stories. We do not study them. We move through them, and they move through us.

And because it is our year, we have added to it. Pridetide in June is our addition, and chapter 16 explains why a church would invent a season (although, "the Church" invented the others…none of them rolled down from Olympus). For now: the calendar is a tool, not a cage. It was made by people and can be made better by people.

Something Is Coming

Advent suggests something is coming, and until it arrives, we wait. I believe, however, that waiting need not be as passive as we tend to make it.

For what, exactly, are we waiting? Are we waiting for Christmas, a time to recall the birth of Jesus? Well, that's happened, and we make a much bigger deal of it than Jesus ever did. Jesus's birth is only mentioned twice in the Bible and Jesus never refers to it. The only thing St. Paul ever said about Jesus's birth is that he was "born of a woman." We might have figured that out on our own.

So, if we are just waiting for the party to celebrate a birth that happened in Palestine a couple of millennia ago, then we are waiting for the past. There's never much power in worshiping the past or longing for its return.

Some will say that the wait isn't for Jesus's birth (or the commemoration of his birth), but for his return. Well, that wait is already a couple of millennia in process. Maybe that just isn't going to happen the way our ancestors imagined. The writer of Mark's gospel thought it would happen in his lifetime, and so did St. Paul. They, apparently, were mistaken.

Waiting for some future event to make everything alright mostly keeps us from doing what we can now to make things better. While we are waiting for a superhero to appear in the skies to save the day, we ought to be addressing climate change, poverty, racism, homophobia and transphobia, war, and a woman's right to bodily autonomy here and now. The mythic return hasn't happened and may not, so we better get to work.

But wait! (I couldn't help myself.) The past and the future won't fix our messes, but we can make things better in the present, in the now. And maybe that's what we are waiting for: the realization that we have the power to make a difference, today.

At Sunshine Cathedral we don't necessarily expect a literal return of Christ but rather find the Parousia (Greek word for "coming") to be symbolic of followers of Jesus learning to allow the light that was in Jesus to also shine here and now in our lives. Indeed, we often

say that WE are the return of Christ, the Body of Christ continuing the work of Justice-Love in the world.

Some believe (I am among them) that the Pentecost narrative in Acts 2 is a story about Christ's return. Jesus ascends into the unknown and the spirit that motivated his work descends upon the church soon after, raising them up to be the body of Christ on earth, the Christ presence meant to continue doing what Jesus did: heal, empower, encourage, bring together, and cast a vision of what is possible for people who live in the power of love.

We are the return of Christ! We don't need to wait for the return; we need to wake up to the fact that we are it, and then get to work being Christ in the world.

And that brings me back to the word "wait." Waiting doesn't just mean sitting around until something turns up. When we wait "on" someone, we are serving them. A waiter brings coffee or food or drinks; someone "waiting hand and foot" on a sick loved one is actively caring for them. To wait on Jesus could mean to serve Jesus's mission, and we do that with our worship and also with our acts of kindness, generosity, compassion, and justice.

Something is coming and we are waiting for it. Maybe what is coming is a better world, and it will happen as we get busy waiting on the wounded, disenfranchised, lonely, degraded, forgotten, and oppressed of the world. Rather than waiting FOR Jesus, let's try to be like Jesus and wait ON those who are hurting, and that is what can transform the world. And for that, we are all still waiting.

Why Keep Advent at All?

I've answered this to my satisfaction, but I realize that there are still other perspectives. So let me say something about the discipline, or skill, of waiting.

If we do not expect a literal return of Jesus, and if his original arrival already happened and Jesus never even mentioned it, why keep a season of waiting? Why not go straight to the party?

Because waiting is a skill, and it is one we are losing in a world of instant messages, microwave meals, facetime calls, home deliveries, Zoom meetings that don't require travel, money changing hands via Paypal, CashApp, and Venmo rather than face to face or postal service. People even go to church less frequently because they enjoy the convenience of turning in on their phone or computer without the need to dress, drive or even get out of bed. In a world of immediacy, waiting may actually be good medicine.

We are, by every measure, more anxious and less hopeful than the generations who had to wait for everything. It turns out that getting what you want immediately does not teach you to want the right things. It teaches you to want more, faster.

Advent is four weeks of practicing a different posture. It is the deliberate cultivation of expectancy: not the expectation of a particular event on a particular date, but the settled, active conviction that something good is on its way and that the waiting itself is part of it. A pregnant woman is not passive. Neither is a farmer in winter, or an artist between drafts, or a person in recovery on day nine. They are all waiting on something, in the serving sense, doing the daily work that makes room for what is coming.

The old disciplines of Advent, weekly worship, daily prayer, and giving generously are exactly that kind of work. They are how you wait on a better world. You show up. You keep your inner life tended. You loosen your grip on what you have. And when Christmas comes, you find that you are ready for it, not because you counted the days but because you spent them.

That is why we keep Advent in a church that does not expect anyone to descend from the sky. We are not waiting for Christ. We are waiting on the world, and Advent is where we practice.

Hope, Peace, Joy, Love

The four Sundays of Advent each carry a theme, and at Sunshine Cathedral a candle is lit for each. A short meditation on each.

Hope. The first candle is lit in the darkest part of the year, and it is the smallest light in the room. That is the point. Hope is not optimism. Optimism looks at the evidence and predicts a good outcome. Hope looks at the evidence, finds it discouraging, and lights a candle anyway. The prophets who first spoke of a coming one were writing in exile, in an occupied land, with no evidence that anything would change. They hoped, and their hoping was itself a form of resistance. To light the first candle is to say: the dark is real, and it is not the whole story.

Peace. The second candle. The angels in Luke will announce peace on earth, and the empire had already announced it: the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome, which was the peace of the conquered. The peace Advent waits for is a different kind. It is not the absence of conflict but the presence of right relationship, the Hebrew shalom, wholeness, everything in its place and everyone with enough. You cannot have that peace while the wounded are unattended. Peace is what justice-love looks like when it has finished its work, and the second candle is lit for a world that has not seen it yet.

Joy. The third candle, traditionally rose-colored, a break in the blue of waiting. Joy in Advent is not the joy of the party arriving. It is the joy of knowing the party is coming, which is a strange and specific pleasure. Anyone who has planned a wedding or waited for a child knows it: the anticipation carries its own gladness, sometimes greater than the

event. We light the third candle to say that the waiting is not only endurable but sweet, and that a people who wait well are already, in some measure, celebrating.

Love. The fourth candle, the last before Christmas Eve. Everything Advent has been waiting for turns out to be love, taking a shape in the world. Not love in the abstract; love with a face, a body, a name, born to a particular unwed teenager in a particular occupied province. The fourth candle is lit for the conviction that love is not an idea but an event, and that it keeps happening, and that we are among the places it happens.

Four candles, and then the Christ candle in the middle on Christmas Eve, when all the waiting comes to rest. But look at what has been lit by then. Not one light but five, and the room is bright with what four weeks of waiting on the world has made.

Chapter 8: Christmas: Holiday Miracles and Lessons from the Manger

Holiday Miracles

What makes Christmas so compelling? St. Paul doesn't mention Jesus's birth. Mark doesn't mention his birth. John doesn't mention his birth. Only Matthew and Luke, writing decades after Jesus's execution, mention the story (and they differ significantly from each other).

The lateness of the few and brief mentions suggests the story wasn't originally considered to be of primary importance. But this late and brief tale has so captured our imaginations that Christmas has become one of the most important days in our faith experience.

For most of the first century, the nativity stories seem to have been unknown, but in the twenty-first century it's a pretty big deal.

Christmas is another opportunity to let hope be born in our lives. Christmas is also an affirmation of love.

Mary is an unwed mother. Whoever the father is, it is not the man to whom she is betrothed. And it's that peasant teenage unmarried mom who brings us our hero, our teacher, and who raised him to be the liberator we know him to be. Mary's was a sad story until we see Love transform her into the Mother of the Lord, Our Blessed Lady.

Joseph is some guy whose younger fiancée has gotten pregnant but not by him. But Joseph doesn't abandon her. He loves her and gives her child a name. Love saves that family and shows us that love, rather than condemnation, is the divine way. Joseph demonstrates that love makes a family. Love wins.

And the shepherds. Living and working outside. Not high up on the social stratification pyramid. They are as much children of the universe as anyone else. They are as beloved of God as Jesus, Joseph, and Mary are. There are no nobodies in the Realm of God.

Don't forget the angels. Angels are messengers of God, and what is their message? "Do not be afraid."

You see, God is love and "Fear not!" is Love's message. When you were afraid as a child, did your older sister or your dad or your grandmother or your auntie say, "It's okay. It'll be fine. Try not to worry"? That's love's message.

Fear not. You are surrounded by light. You are serenaded by heaven. There is joy for you. You can go to peace instead of to pieces.

And, of course, there is a baby. Innocence. Sweetness. Vulnerability. Perfection.

New life is always a powerful reminder that the future has infinite possibilities.

Baby Jesus, wrapped in a blanket, lying in a feeding trough, cooing and fussing, wrinkling his nose and wiggling, just beaming with perfection: years down the road, he'll experience betrayal, legal troubles, torture, but in this moment, he is swaddled in love and all is well. This moment, with no expectations of how things should be and no fear of what might be, being present in this moment, which babies are good at, shows us that contentment and peace are possible, no matter the circumstances.

When he's hungry or wet, he may raise all hell, but the worries of the world are not his. He is fully present in the now, and in the now, we feel the brush of angel wings, we see a comforting and reassuring light.

You realize that this is our story, right?

We are strong Mary.

We are compassionate Joseph.

We are shepherds, learning that God is aware of us and loves us as we are.

We are angels, sharing hope and joy with everyone possible.

We are even the babe in a manger, innocent, beautiful, capable of peace regardless of circumstances.

If things have to be a certain way for us to be happy, we won't often be happy. We can choose how we perceive and respond to things, but we can't control everything that happens in the world.

Flights are canceled, loved ones face difficult times, Christmas dinner may not go to plan, we may seem to be one or two financial missteps from total disaster, but we have our holiday stories reminding us that miracles happen in spite of and in the midst of difficulties. Miracles are just changes in perception, and we can change our perception right now, in the holy, eternal now.

The world seems crazy? What else is new? But Jesus said, “In the world you’ll have some bad days, but buck up. I have overcome the world.” In other words, Jesus knew that when he changed his perception, he changed his experience, and we can do that, too.

You are resilient, you are creative, you deserve to be happy, and you can go to peace instead of to pieces. The rain falls on the just and the unjust, but the miracle workers know how to sing and dance in the rain.

Holiday miracles are available right now, starting with our decision to be happy, swaddled-baby happy, angel-choir happy.

“Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy.”

At Sunshine Cathedral our way of saying that is: You are God’s miracle and not God’s mistake.

“Go to peace instead of to pieces” is a phrase a mentor of mine decades ago would say. It has stayed with me and has been part of my teaching for most of my pastoral career.

The Two Nativities

I said above that Matthew and Luke differ significantly from each other, and it is worth seeing how, because most people have never noticed. What we call “the Christmas story” is a blend that exists in no gospel. It exists on Christmas cards and in children’s pageants, where the shepherds and the magi kneel side by side at the same manger. In the Bible they never meet.

Matthew’s story is Joseph’s story. Joseph gets the dreams, four of them. The family lives in Bethlehem; there is no journey, no inn, no manger. Magi (possibly Zoroastrian priests) come from the east following a star. Herod slaughters the children of Bethlehem. The family flees to Egypt and only later settles in Nazareth, because it isn’t safe to go home. Matthew’s genealogy runs back to Abraham, and it includes four women, every one of them with a scandal attached: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and “the wife of Uriah” (Bathsheba). Matthew is telling the story of a new Moses, born under a murderous king, escaping through Egypt, and he wants his Jewish readers to catch every echo.

Luke’s story is Mary’s story. Mary gets the angel, the annunciation, the Magnificat (challenging the unjust imperial authorities), and the long visit with Elizabeth. The family lives in Nazareth and travels to Bethlehem for a (historically doubtful) census. There is an inn with no room, a manger, shepherds in the fields, a choir of angels. No magi, no star, no Herod’s massacre, no Egypt. Eight days later the baby is circumcised, and forty days later he is presented in the Temple in Jerusalem, and then they go home to Nazareth in peace. Luke’s genealogy runs back to Adam, not just Abraham, because Luke is writing for Gentiles and wants a Jesus who belongs to the whole human family.

The two stories cannot both be factual as written (but both in various ways can be true). In Matthew the family is from Bethlehem and ends up in Nazareth as refugees. In Luke the family is from Nazareth and goes to Bethlehem for a census. Matthew has them fleeing Herod, who died in 4 BCE. Luke has them traveling for a census under Quirinius, which took place in 6 CE. There is a ten-year gap between the two settings and no way to close it.

I say this not to spoil Christmas but to save it. If you need the two stories to be one factual account, you will spend your energy defending a harmony that the gospel writers never intended and never offered, and you will miss what each of them was actually saying. Matthew was saying: this child is the new Moses, and the empire will try to kill him, and it will ultimately fail. Luke was saying: this child is for everyone, announced first to shepherds, born among the animals, and the whole world is invited. Both are true. Neither is a police report. Read them as what they are and they are inexhaustible.

Lessons from the Manger Story

“Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

In that single sentence there are three things I want to lift up for Christmas Day.

1. Mary gave birth. Yeah, people do it every day. But Mary’s pregnancy was challenging. It was a scandal. You see, her man Joseph isn’t the father.

He loves her enough to marry her anyway so that her life isn’t ruined by this. That she’s pregnant at all is definitely a scandal.

She also has this baby while traveling. Probably unwise to travel far distances on foot or by donkey or even a bumpy wagon when you’re nine months pregnant, but maybe there was no option. Maybe she felt unsafe to be left alone while Joseph was away.

So, Mary has endured scandal, uncertainty, and dangerous travel: that she successfully gives birth to a healthy child is a bit of a miracle; it’s certainly a lucky break.

In spite of a series of difficulties, Mary does something incredible.

2. She wrapped him in swaddling cloths. Babies are so snug when they’re swaddled. It’s like being hugged every second.

Jesus is homeless, about to be lying on hay covered in animal slobber, but through it all he is swaddled, held, kept warm, cherished, cared for.

No matter how scary that night was, Jesus was swaddled, held, loved.

3. She laid the baby in a manger, a feeding trough. There is no room, no bed, no proper shelter, there is nothing, and in the midst of nothing, they found something.

Mangers aren't usually used as bassinets. But necessity is the mother of invention. From nothing, a crib is fashioned and a way was provided when there seemed to be no way.

Things aren't always fair, but grace is equal to every need.

I hope those three lessons are useful for you, today and throughout the year, every year.

1. Even when things are tough, you're pretty resilient and capable. There is wisdom and peace and hope within you and you can call those helpers out when you need them. Even if it isn't easy, you can do something incredible.
2. No matter what happens and no matter what anyone says, there is a Love that will not and cannot let you go. You are forever swaddled in God's love.
3. Even when there seems to be nothing for you, look again; there may be something hiding in the nothing. You may need to get creative, but in a world where mangers can become cradles, we can all make something of nothing.

Remember today and always: you are capable, you are loved, and every now and then, you are even able to make something out of nothing.

God With Us

Matthew says the child will be called Emmanuel, God with us (a royal title found in Isaiah for a prince in King Hezekiah's family). It is the name the church has built the doctrine of the incarnation on. God came down. God took flesh. God, who was believed to be far, is experienced as near. God with us, for me, also means God in us, perhaps even God as us.

I love the name and I want to keep it. But omnipresence asks a question of it that has to be faced honestly. If there is not a spot where God is not, if God was already in the manger, in the hay, in the animals, in Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and the innkeeper who had no room, then what did the birth of Jesus add? God was already with us. God could not have been anywhere else. What does "God with us" mean if God was never anywhere but with us?

Here is my answer, and it is the answer of the mystics before me. The incarnation does not change where God is. It changes whether we can see it.

The Presence is everywhere, but it has no face. You cannot look at the ground of being. You cannot hold it or hear it cry. It is the water the fish swims in, and the fish does not know the water is there. What happens in the manger is that the water takes a shape a fish can see. The everywhere-God, who is Love, becomes a particular love, with a particular body, born to particular people, in a particular feeding trough. Not because God was absent before. Because we didn't notice before, and now we do.

That is what Emmanuel means in a theology of omnipresence. Not “God has arrived” but “God has become visible to us.” The word made flesh is the omnipresence localized, and having found it in Jesus, learn to find it everywhere and in everyone.

This is also why we can say that we are the return of Christ. If the incarnation is the omnipresence taking a visible shape, then it did not happen once. It happens every time the Presence becomes visible in a human life: in Mary’s courage, in Joseph’s tenderness, in the shepherds’ wonder, in anyone who feeds the hungry or holds a frightened child or says “fear not” to someone in the dark. God is always with us. Christmas is the day we celebrate the moments when we allow ourselves to remember that.

Chapter 9: Epiphany: The Children of God

Now That’s an Epiphany

The Feast of the Epiphany is celebrated on January 6th.

The Epiphany story comes from Matthew’s gospel. Magi (wise ones) from Persia (some say India), practicing the occult art of astrology, see a sign in the heavens that lets them know a special baby has been born. They decide to make a long journey (could have taken a couple of years) to seek out this blessed child.

Once they arrive in Jerusalem, they ask the Jewish king where the special baby born to be the next Jewish king is staying. Herod is unaware that there is any king in the wings waiting to replace him. He tells the visitors that he doesn’t know where this young prince is but if they find him to let him know so that he can honor him properly. Spoiler alert: he doesn’t want to honor him. He wants to kill him (insert maniacal laugh here).

The magi, then, keep following the seemingly moving star until it stops right over Jesus’s house. Stars are high up. They look like they are right over every house, but it’s a story, and stories can have anything happen that the author desires.

They find little Jesus, give him gifts (that are symbolic of spiritual gifts), and neither Mary nor Jesus ever seems to be in possession of those gifts ever again (but, it’s a story; it doesn’t need to be factual or even to make sense to be beautiful and rich and meaningful).

The magi are warned in a psychic dream not to go back to Herod and so they go home by a different route. The Holy Family, for their safety, become refugees in Egypt.

I doubt if any of this happened (though there is a spot in Egypt that celebrates being the place where Jesus’s family took refuge). I doubt if magi traveled years to find a toddler they learned about from the sky. I doubt if they walked right into the royal palace to ask for directions. I doubt if Herod would have been threatened by three strangers following

a star. Herod might have even known that stars don't travel through the sky nor do they "stop" over a particular earthly location.

The "epiphany" is meant to be that these fictional magi discover the Christ Child and give him due veneration. They have found Christ, the light, the prophet, the healer, the anointed one, the living reminder that God is with us.

There may be other "aha" moments and discoveries we can take from the story as well. For instance, the magi (if Persian and possibly even if Indian) would have been Zoroastrian priests, not Jewish and certainly not Christian (no one was yet Christian). So, the divine encounter represented by Christ is shown to be available to everyone, regardless of religious affiliation. Moreover, there are three gifts but we are never told how many magi there are. Are there two, three, thirty? How many did the author imagine? He or she forgot to say.

Some scholars believe the magi would have been gender non-conforming, perhaps even transgender by today's understanding. Could it have been members of the Queer community that find and rejoice in the presence of Christ? LGBTQ+ people can certainly experience the Christ Light in their own lives today.

And finally, after the magi leave (defying imperial authority in order to protect Jesus and his family), the Holy Family cross a border to find safety in another land. To love Jesus is to identify with and care about refugees, to care about human suffering and not simply identify hurting people as a problem to ignore or turn away.

The real epiphany in the story may be that it shows the value of compassion, the resilience of the marginalized, the artificialness of religious enmity, the value of diversity, and the sacred value of all people: poor children, people of various religious traditions, refugees, LGBTQ+ people. The story isn't that three kings (or three queens) found the child of God; the real epiphany is that the story beautifully affirms that we all are the children of God.

Outsiders First

I want to press on one detail, because it is the detail Matthew most wanted his readers to notice and it is the one we most easily skip.

In Matthew's gospel, the first people to recognize Jesus are not Jews. They are not shepherds, either; those are Luke's. The first people to find the child and venerate him are foreigners, from another religion, practicing an art that the Torah forbids. Deuteronomy condemns astrology and divination in plain terms. The magi are, by the standards of the community Jesus was born into, exactly the kind of people who should not have been there.

And Matthew, of all the gospel writers, is the one most concerned with Jewish identity. He is the one who quotes the prophets at every turn, who structures his book like the five books of Moses, who has Jesus say that not one stroke of the law will pass away. This is the writer who chose to open his story with Zoroastrian astrologers kneeling at the cradle while the king in Jerusalem, the scribes, and the priests who could quote the prophecy about Bethlehem from memory, stayed home.

That is not an accident. Matthew is making a point at the very beginning that he will make again at the very end, when the risen Jesus sends his disciples to all nations. The Christ was never the property of the people who had the scriptures. The ones who had the map did not make the journey. The ones who made the journey had only a star and a hunch, and it was enough.

For a church full of people who were told they had the wrong beliefs, the wrong practices, the wrong lives to approach Christ, this is the good news of Epiphany. The first ones through the door were the ones who normally would not have been let in. They came anyway. And their gifts were received and appreciated without a word about their religion.

Across the Border

The second detail I want to hold up is the last one in the story, the one that comes after the magi have gone.

Joseph is warned in a dream that Herod is coming for the child. He gets up in the night, takes the mother and the baby, and flees to Egypt, where they stay until Herod is dead. Matthew adds one of his prophecy quotations: “Out of Egypt I have called my child.” The line is from Hosea, and in Hosea it is about Israel, about the Exodus. Matthew is saying the child relives the whole story of his people, and that story begins as a story of people who had to leave.

The Holy Family are refugees. Not metaphorically. They are a family from an occupied territory, fleeing a ruler who wants to kill their child, crossing a border into a foreign country where they have no standing and no rights and where they will stay as long as it takes for it to be safe to go home. Every element of the modern refugee’s situation is there. The Coptic Church in Egypt still keeps the sites where tradition says they sheltered, and Egyptian Christians take a quiet pride in having been the country that let them in.

The church has not always drawn the conclusion. It has sung about the flight into Egypt and voted to close the border in the same week. But the conclusion is not hard to draw. If Jesus was a refugee, then the refugee at the border is where Christ is. The child of God who fled Herod is standing in every line at every checkpoint, holding a child, hoping the country on the other side has room.

Our commitment to Global Human Rights is not a policy preference bolted onto a theology. It is Epiphany. It is what you do once you have noticed who is crossing the border.

The Season of Light

Epiphany is a feast, but it is also a season ("Season of" or "Season after" Epiphany), the weeks between January 6 and Ash Wednesday. And it has a theme, which is light.

The Hebrew Scripture reading for the feast is Isaiah 60: "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and divine glory has risen upon you." The magi follow a star. The child represents, in the Fourth Gospel's prologue read at Christmas, the light that shines in the darkness. And on the last Sunday of the season, the church reads the Transfiguration narrative, where Jesus goes up a mountain and his face and clothing blaze with light, and a voice says: this is my beloved.

So the season runs from one light to another. It begins with a star above, small and far away, seen by outsiders as if it were near. It ends with a face on a mountain, close and beaming, seen by friends. In between, the church reads the stories of Jesus's early ministry, his baptism, stories of his miracles, the calling of his disciples, the Sermon on the Mount (or the Plain), the light getting brighter as more people come to see it.

The word "epiphany" means manifestation, a showing. Something not previously seen becomes seen. In the Eastern churches the feast celebrates three showings at once: the magi, Jesus' baptism, and the wedding at Cana, three moments when Jesus' light, nature, and essence broke through the surface. And that is the pattern of the whole season. The omnipresence, which is everywhere and invisible, keeps showing itself: to foreigners, to a crowd at a river, to guests at a wedding, and finally, on the mountain, to the people who thought they knew him and found they had not really seen him at all.

Chapter 11 takes up the mountain. For now, the beginning of the season is enough. A star, a road, some outsiders who did not know what they were looking for and found it. It is time to shine, the Transfiguration homily will say. Epiphany is where the shining starts.

Chapter 10: Ordinary Time: The Long Green Season

Most of the Christian year is not a feast.

Add up the seasons that have a story attached, Advent, Christmastide, Epiphany, Lent, Eastertide, and you get about half the calendar. The rest, the weeks after Epiphany until Lent begins and the long stretch from Trinity Sunday to the last Sunday before Advent, is

called Ordinary Time. The altar is green. There is no candle to light, no ashes, no palms, no lilies. The lectionary simply reads its way through one of the gospels, a few verses at a time, week after week, from early summer to late autumn.

People new to liturgical seasons will sometimes ask what they are supposed to feel during Ordinary Time. The honest answer is: whatever you feel on a Tuesday. That is the point of it.

Not Ordinary as in Dull

The name is a little unfortunate. “Ordinary” in “Ordinary Time” does not mean unremarkable. It comes from ordinal, the counted numbers: the Sundays are simply numbered in order, the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost or the Twenty-Third Sunday in ordinary, etc. But the accidental meaning has stuck, and I have come to think it is the truer one. This is the season of the ordinary. It is where the church practices finding God in the weeks that have nothing special, sexy, or dramatic about them.

Green is the color, and green is for growth. Things that grow do not do it in bursts. A tree does not put on a year’s growth on Easter morning. It grows a little every day of the long season, unnoticed, until autumn, when you can see that it is taller. Ordinary Time is the church’s growing season. Nothing dramatic is supposed to happen, just slow growth, healing, or evolution.

And here is what surprises people who come from a feast-and-fast religious background: most of Jesus’s ministry is read in Ordinary Time. The parables, the healings, the arguments with the authorities, the Sermon on the Mount, the calling and sending of disciples, the meals with the “wrong” people: nearly all of it falls in the green weeks. The feasts tell the story of who Jesus is. Ordinary Time tells the story of what he did, and he did it on Tuesdays.

The God of the Weekday

A theology of omnipresence is, before anything else, a theology of Ordinary Time.

If God were only in the special moments, the mountaintops and the empty tombs, then the calendar’s feasts would be the whole of religion and the green weeks would be the waiting room between them (however, it must noted that many Christians treat the religious year like that…intermittent times to make an appearance at Christmas and Easter, weddings and funerals, and occasional moments of crisis). A great deal of Christianity has lived that way for a while now: revival to revival, Christmas to Easter, with long dry stretches in between during which God was assumed to be busy elsewhere.

But there is not a spot where God is not, and there is not a time when God is not. The Presence is as fully present at four o'clock on a Wednesday in August as it is at midnight on Christmas Eve. The difference is not in God. It is in how diligent we are in looking. The feasts are designed to make us look. Ordinary Time is where we find out whether we learned anything.

Brother Lawrence, a seventeenth-century French monk who worked in the monastery kitchen, said that he felt as close to God among the pots and pans as he did at the altar, and that the practice of the presence of God was not a matter of set prayers but of turning toward the Presence in the middle of whatever he was doing. He called it a habit. New Thought calls it the same thing: the habitual awareness that we are in the Presence now, wherever now happens to be. The Daily Power Thought that lands in your inbox at nine every morning is an Ordinary Time practice. So is Midday Prayer that we livestream. So is the affirmation you say in the car before a hard meeting. None of them is a feast. All of them are in the green season.

What Grows

Jesus said the kin-dom of God is like a mustard seed, a very small seed, that grows into a shrub big enough for birds to nest in. He said it is like yeast that a grandmother kneads into three measures of flour until the whole batch is leavened. He said it is like a seed that a farmer scatters and then goes to sleep and gets up, night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows, somehow.

Every one of those images is an Ordinary Time image. Nothing happens in a moment. The growth is hidden. The farmer does not stay up watching. And yet, at the end of the season, the shrub is there, the bread has risen, the field is ready.

I have watched congregations try to live on feasts alone, and it does not work. The Easter crowd is enormous and the pews are half empty by June, and the people who came for the drama have gone looking for the next one. What builds a church, what builds a life, is the people who come in the green weeks, when there is nothing to see but a few verses of Mark and a hymn they have sung before. They are the ones who are growing. They are the ones who will be there when the hard thing comes, because they have learned to find God on an ordinary day, and a hard day is only an ordinary day with the volume turned up.

A Season for Justice-Love

One more thing about the long green stretch. It is when justice-love gets done.

The feasts inspire. Ordinary Time is when the food pantry is open. It is when someone sits with a dying member for the fourth Thursday in a row. It is when the committee meets, the budget is balanced, the newsletter goes out, the volunteer shows up for the shift no one else wanted. None of it is dramatic. All of it is the kin-dom, growing the way a mustard seed grows, without anybody watching.

We say at the end of every service, “Our worship has ended, let our service begin.” Ordinary Time is the season the sentence was written for. Twenty-some green Sundays in a row, and between each of them, six days of service, in which the Presence is exactly as present as it was on the mountain, and considerably easier to miss.

Chapter 11: Transfiguration: Time to Shine

Moses spends time communing with God, and when he is next seen, he is beaming. As with most of the Bible, I take that as literary rather than literal, but true in the sense that communion with the divine should make us shine.

God is love, and as we commune with endless, omnipresent love, love should radiate from us as beams of goodwill. Once we’ve encountered the Sacred, it’s time to shine.

Elijah and Elisha are walking when a fiery chariot rolls past them and a trailing whirlwind catches Elijah up and takes him to another world. The light of the fire and the wind of destiny carry Elijah to other realms.

Having never really died, it was thought that Elijah would one day return. A place is still set for Elijah at the Passover table, in case this is the night he returns, and this is the house where he shows up.

Again: literary, not literal, but we see the prophet for justice being swept up into a sky lit with heavenly flames, shining all the way to glory. When we do our best for Justice-Love, it’s time to shine.

Jesus tells his friends and disciples: some of you will live to see the son of humanity coming into divine glory.

Quick aside: son of humanity/human one/son of man is the translation for descendant of ‘adam (earth-being). The son of humanity. One who is so fully human he expresses divine love. One who is so fully human he demonstrates how we can all live more fully into our humanity, and thereby, express divinity.

Son of Humanity

That aside deserves a moment longer, because “son of man” is one of the strangest phrases in the gospels and one of the most misread.

Jesus uses it constantly, and it seems mostly about himself. Nobody else in the gospels calls him that. In Hebrew and Aramaic, *ben adam* and *bar enash* mean, at the most basic level, "a human being." Ezekiel is addressed as "son of man" ninety-some times, and it means simply "mortal," "you human." When Jesus says the son of man has nowhere to lay his head, he may mean nothing more than "this human being here is homeless."

But there is a second layer, from the book of Daniel, where "one like a human/like a 'son of man" comes with the clouds of the sky and is given dominion over all peoples, and his dominion is everlasting. In Daniel that figure represents the faithful people of Israel, vindicated by God after suffering under the empires that trampled them. So when Jesus says the human one/son of man will come…he is pulling both layers at once: the ordinary human being, and the suffering people who will be vindicated.

Put them together and you get what I said above. The son of humanity is the one so fully human that the divine shows through, and the one whose humanity stands for all of ours. Not a being from another category. One of us, all the way, and for that reason able to show the rest of us what we are.

You'll live to see an example of humanness at its best.

And you'll see this child of earth, this fully human one, this one who is one with all of humanity; you will see this one coming into his or her power.

That is, you'll see the one who lives with human kindness, expressing justice-love; you'll see that one coming into his own or into her own. You'll see that for them, it's time to shine.

Some of you will live to see glimpses of human potential making a huge difference, and the difference makers will come into their own; they will shine.

Then eight days later, Jesus and Peter, John and James go on a spiritual retreat. They go on a high mountain; that's a symbol for the divine presence. They are going for concentrated and continual prayer. They're sneaking off for a spiritual renewal. They share a vision of Jesus in the company of Moses and Elijah.

The Mountain

Every tradition has its mountain. Sinai, where Moses met the fire. Horeb (same mountain), where Elijah heard the still small voice. Carmel, Zion, Olympus, Fuji, the high places where the ground rises toward the sky and the air thins and the noise of the valley falls away. The mountain is where people have always gone when they needed the Presence to be louder than the world.

Luke says Jesus went up to pray. That is the whole reason given. Not to perform a miracle, not to teach, not to be seen. To pray, with three friends, away from the crowds

that had been pressing on him for chapters. It is, in the plainest sense, a retreat: a few people leaving their work to go somewhere quiet and pay attention.

I do not think it is accidental that the shining happens there. Not because God is more present on a mountain; there's not a spot where God is not. But because the people on the mountain are more present to God. They have stripped away the demands and the distractions and the next thing on the calendar. They are doing nothing but attending. And when you attend that completely, what was always there becomes visible. The transfiguration is not Jesus becoming something new. It is his friends finally seeing what he was.

We build retreats into the church year for this reason. The mountain does not have to be a mountain. It can be a weekend away, a morning of silence, an hour in the columbarium chapel, a single breath before the meeting starts. What matters is the coming away for a time of communion. Something in us has to leave the valley before we fully experience the light.

Some will suggest Jesus' encounter with Moses and Elijah it's a trinitarian image (big stretch).

Some will say it's a witness to resurrection power. If dead Moses is present, and if swept-away Elijah is back, then resurrection must be a thing, and since this is written long after Jesus's execution, it might also be meant to say, hey, Moses didn't stay dead, Elijah didn't really die, and so we can believe in Jesus's significance beyond death, too.

It does occur to me that it also suggests the return of Elijah we've been waiting for has happened, not only in this mystical vision, but also in the ministry of Jesus, and as Elijah's spirit lived on in his disciple Elisha, Jesus's spirit lives on in his disciples, which are us.

Then a divine voice says, "This is my child with whom I'm well pleased." We can know that we who follow in his footsteps are also beloved children of God.

The son of humanity, the fully human one, is one with us. What is true of him is true of us. We are God's children, and as was true of Moses and Elijah and Jesus; it's time for us to shine.

We follow the son of humanity, the one who shows us we are one with all of humanity, and so for humanity's sake, we are called to share justice-love. It's time to shine. May our commitment to being a loving and healing presence in the world be revived in the season before us.

As we let our light shine, there are people today who will find themselves coming into their own, and this is the good news.

Coming Down

After the mountain top experience, Peter, dazzled, wants to stay. He offers to build three shrines, one for Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah. Luke adds, dryly, that he did not know what he was saying. It is the most human line in the passage. Anyone who has ever had a moment of clarity, a retreat where everything made sense, a worship service where the light got through, knows the temptation: to stay up here, where it is bright, and never go back down to the mess.

Jesus does not ask him to build shrines. The cloud lifts, Moses and Elijah are gone, and the next morning they go down the mountain, straight into a crowd, where a man is begging for help for his son, whom the other disciples have been unable to heal. From the vision to the failure in a single verse. From the shining face to the shrieking child.

That is the shape of the spiritual life as the gospels understand it. You go up to see. You come down to serve. The seeing is real, and it is necessary, and it is not the point. The point is the child at the bottom of the mountain. The light on Jesus's face was never meant to be admired. It was meant to be carried down into the valley, where it is needed.

So the season of light ends, and Lent begins with ashes. That is not a contradiction. It is the descent. You have seen what a human being can be. Now go and be it, in the dust, where the people are.

Chapter 12: Lent: The Road to Resurrection

Ash Wednesday

Lent begins with a smudge of ash on the forehead and a sentence that has been said over Christians for a thousand years: Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

People are sometimes surprised that a church like ours, a progressive church, a metaphysical church, a humanist church, a church that preaches "you are God's miracle," would keep Ash Wednesday. Isn't it the very thing we are healing people from? Isn't it fear-based religion at its purest: sit in the dark, confess your sins, and be told you are going to die?

I understand the objection, and I keep the ashes anyway. Here is why.

The sentence is from Genesis 3, but the image is from Genesis 2, where God forms the human being out of the dust of the ground and breathes into it. Dust is not what we are reduced to. Dust is what we are made of, and what the ancient writer believed called very good. To be reminded that you are dust is to be reminded of your origin, not your shame.

It is to be told: you are part of the earth, part of the cosmos, part of everything else that is of earth and cosmos.

And the second half, to dust you shall return, is simply true. Every person who receives the ashes is going to die. Western religion tends to avoid that fact. Ash Wednesday spends one evening a year making them look at it, and it may be the most honest hour on the calendar. You cannot go to peace instead of to pieces about death if you have never let yourself say the word. The ashes let you say it, in company, with a blessing, and then get up and go home and live. Bodies have a shelf life; spirit does not. The first observation is an irrefutable fact, the second is my deeply held belief.

There is a practical beauty in where the ashes come from, too. They are made by burning last year's palms, the branches waved on Palm Sunday. What was a celebration becomes dust. The whole year folds into itself. The crowd that shouted hosanna (help us, save us) while waving their palms will still meet the same end that all mortals do; their "help me" palms become the ashes on our foreheads. Maybe the ritual does help, or save us, from fear of the inevitable and helps us trust that in this life and in whatever may follow, God, divine Love, is ever present. This becomes an invitation to spend the next forty days (46 really but we don't count Sundays in Lent since Sunday is always Resurrection day) finding out how a person gets from "help us" to "all is well."

I grew up in the Bible Belt hearing evangelicals say that the joyful, hopeful crowd on Palm Sunday was also the cruel crowd only days later calling for Jesus' execution. I have no reason to believe that either event literally happened nor that if it did the crowds were composed of the same people. That seems some sort of "guilt" trip inherent to evangelical theology. But it is true that we are all capable of celebration and vilification, of delight and despair, of kindness and of character assasination. Hosanna (taken from a verse in the Psalter) probably meant "save us from the empire" but for us it could also mean "save us from becoming less loving than we are designed to be.

At Sunshine Cathedral the ashes have been imposed on the church steps, in the worship center, in smaller chapels, even in the Pub (yes, we have a pub)...that they can be shared anywhere seems super right to me.

In places where people gather, pray, eat, drink, celebrate, mourn, live…is exactly where dust settles and rises; it's exactly where life happens, and where life happens is where hope lives.

When I impose ashes I rather than saying "from dust you came to dust return" or "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" I usually say, "You are star dust, earth dust, and fairy dust." Dust isn't humiliating, it's magic, it's part of eternity, it's ubiquitous, and that is a powerful reminder of our resilience, our endurance, and our endless worth.

There's not a spot where God is not…even dust is full of God. The body becomes dust again one day, but the dust never seems to go away.

Forty Days

The number is from the wilderness. Israel wandered forty years. Moses fasted forty days on the mountain. Elijah walked forty days to Horeb. And Jesus, after his baptism, spent forty days in the wilderness, where, the gospels say, he wrestled with doubt and temptation.

The temptation story is a favorite of literalists and a puzzle for everyone else. Did the devil actually appear? If there's not a spot where God is not, there is no devil, or if there is, It/She/He is also part of God (and therefore redeemable).

Did Jesus actually stand on the pinnacle of the Temple? As you know already, I have doubts. Was there a mountain from which all the kingdoms of the world could be seen? No mountain on earth is that high, and I doubt the writer thought there was. As with the star that stops over a house, it's a story, and stories can have anything happen that the author desires.

What the story is about is power, and what to do with it. Read the three temptations that way and they open up.

Turn stones into bread: use your gifts to take care of yourself first. Jesus refuses, and he will spend the rest of the gospel feeding other people.

Throw yourself from the Temple and let the angels catch you: make a spectacle, prove yourself, force God's hand. Jesus refuses, and he will spend the rest of the gospel telling people he heals not to brag about it.

Bow down and receive all the wealth and power of the world: take the empire's power, on the empire's terms, and use it (presumably) for good. Jesus refuses, and the empire will kill him for refusing.

Every one of those is a temptation the church has failed. We have used our gifts for ourselves. We have made spectacles. And, above all, we have taken the empire's power on the empire's terms, again and again, telling ourselves we would use it for good. The forty days are the church's annual chance to go back into the wilderness and remember what the answer was.

For the individual, the wilderness is wherever the props come down. It is the place where you find out what you actually believe when the noise stops, and what you actually want when no one is watching, and whether the self you have been presenting is the self that is there. Moses and his people found out in the desert. Jesus found out in the desert. Lent is the season for finding out.

The Three Disciplines, Reinterpreted

The traditional practices of Lent are three: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. They are ancient, they are good, and for a great many of the people who come through our doors they are radioactive, because they were taught as punishments.

Prayer was the thing you did to appease an angry God. Fasting was the thing you did to punish a sinful body. Giving was the thing you did to buy your way out of guilt. For someone recovering from fear-based religion, being told to "take on a Lenten discipline" can trigger the entire apparatus of shame that they came here to escape.

So I want to say what each of the three is for, in a theology of omnipresence.

Prayer is not appeasement. There is no one to appease; the Presence is Love and is already here. Lenten prayer is attention. It is forty days of turning, deliberately, several times a day, toward the fact that you are in God now. Pick a time. Pick an affirmation. Say it until the saying becomes a noticing. That is the discipline, and discipline is simply teaching (which is why a master teacher's students are called "disciples").

Fasting is not punishing the body. The body is dust that God breathed into and called very good, and it does not need punishing. Fasting is clearing. It is the deliberate setting aside of something that fills your days so that you can see what is under it. Traditionally the something is food, and for some people that still works. For others the more honest fast is from the phone, or from the news, or from the voice in your head that narrates your failures. I have suggested to more than one person that they give up shame for Lent. Forty days of refusing to say the cruel thing to yourself. It is harder than chocolate, and it changes more.

Almsgiving is not buying your way out of anything. It is the Sacrament of Sharing, practiced with intention. If all is God, if there is one Substance and you are part of it, then what you have was never separate from what your neighbor lacks, and giving is not a loss but a circulation. Lenten giving is forty days of practicing the truth that you are not a closed system. Give to the pantry. Give to a stranger. Give time. The point is not the amount. The point is the loosening of the fist.

Prayer, fasting, giving: attention, clearing, circulation. They are the same three disciplines the church has always kept. They are simply pointed in a different direction: not toward a God who must be satisfied but toward a Presence that is waiting to be experienced.

The Ghost Light

Theatres are comfortable homes for ghosts, or so the tradition holds. The “ghost light” (the bulb that stays lit when the theatre is empty and otherwise dark) is meant to be a safety measure (a night light of sorts), but it is also said to keep the ghosts content.

Why should theatres be haunted? Some say that spirits enjoy entertainment as much as anyone, so why wouldn’t they like hanging out in theatres? Others will point out that theatre is the very means of making magic: on the boards is where you’ll find genies and sugar plum fairies, philosophical caterpillars and singing lions, and possibly even a six-foot rabbit! Entire towns and families come to life, phantoms sing, and soldiers perish one night only to live again and die again the very next night. In such a world of magic, one might expect, or at least not be surprised by, the presence of ghosts.

And energy, as we know, is never destroyed. Everything is energy. The energy that playwrights and actors and directors (and even audiences, who must lend the energy of their imagination to the enterprise) exert in creating characters’ lives and relationships is not destroyed; could it be that some of it remains, at least for a while, on or near the stage where it took form and expression?

I point out the tradition of theatre ghosts as a way of giving myself permission (and you too, if you’d like) to entertain other spirits, angels, ancestors, fairies, saints, and the like. Of course, Jesus lives among us, and perhaps Blessed Mary, too. Maybe archangels watch over us and departed loved ones still hug us in non-material ways. Why shouldn’t the energy of heroes and friends, historical and imagined, remain with us to keep us company, to give us inspiration, and to remind us that what we put out into the world lasts far beyond our earthly years?

The Season of Lent leads us to Easter, a time when we affirm that one who was taken from us somehow remained and remains with us. Our worship, prayer, study, and other spiritual disciplines are adding to a ubiquitous and everlasting energy, a resurrection power, that is always present to bless, comfort, encourage, and renew.

Holy Week

The last seven days of Lent have their own name and their own weight. Everything the season has been walking toward happens in one week, and the church has marked its days for as long as there has been an institutional church.

Palm Sunday: Two Processions

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan pointed out something about Palm Sunday that changed how I read it. On the same day that Jesus rode into Jerusalem from the east, on a

donkey, with peasants waving branches, the Roman governor was almost certainly riding in from the west, on a warhorse, with cavalry and foot soldiers, to reinforce the garrison for Passover. Pilate did not live in Jerusalem. He came up for the feast, every year, because Passover was when the city filled with pilgrims celebrating their liberation from an empire, and the current empire wanted them to see its swords.

Two processions. One announces the peace of Rome, the peace of the conquered. The other, staged deliberately, acts out a prophecy from Zechariah: "your king comes to you, humble and riding on a donkey, and he will cut off the chariot and the warhorse and the battle bow, and command peace to the nations." It is political theatre. Jesus is saying, in a way everyone in the crowd would have understood: there is another kind of leader, and another kind of peace, and here is what it looks like. It looks like a peasant on a borrowed donkey.

The crowd shouts hosanna, which means "save us." The palms you wave today become next year's ashes. Palm Sunday asks: which procession are you in? Not once. Every day.

Maundy Thursday: The Commandment

Maundy Thursday takes its name from mandatum, mandate or commandment, because of what Jesus says at the supper in John's gospel: a new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you. It's not really new, he's been saying it throughout the gospels. Still, it always seems new to learn that we are meant to love even when love seems counterintuitive.

He says it after doing something few spiritual leaders and no lord would do: he takes off his outer garment, wraps a towel around his waist, and washes his disciples' feet. Peter, appalled, tries to refuse. Jesus tells him that if he does not accept this, he doesn't yet get what he's about.

It is a concrete picture of justice-love in the gospels. The one they call Lord and Teacher on his knees with a basin, doing the work of the lowest servant in the house, and then telling them to do the same for each other. Not to feel love. To wash feet. To do something. To not let status keep you from showing loving-kindness.

The supper itself is what we remember every Sunday in the Sacrament of Hospitality (Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, the Mass, the Eucharist). At Sunshine Cathedral we call it a love feast, and we mean it: an open table, no membership required, bread and juice and a blessing.

The Last Supper was, we imagine, a Passover meal. St. Paul describes it first (and he wasn't there), but the tradition shows us Jesus at table with people who would betray, deny, and abandon him within hours, and he fed them anyway. That is the table we keep.

Everyone at it has failed somebody. Everyone is fed. We make mistakes but we are not mistakes, and love nourishes us all, unconditionally.

Good Friday: What the Cross Is Not

I need to say plainly what we do not believe about Good Friday, because it is the day on which fear-based religion has done its deepest damage.

We do not believe that Jesus needed to die a violent, brutal death at a relatively young age. We do not teach that Jesus was tortured to death to pay a debt that human sin had incurred. That theory, called penal substitution, is not the teaching of the early church; it takes its full form in the eleventh century and hardens in the sixteenth. It makes God the executioner. It makes the cross a transaction. It makes divine love conditional on an innocent person's pain, and it has taught millions of people that the God who loves them is also the God who would have rejected them if someone else had not stepped in to buy their redemption with pain and suffering.

That is not the God of omnipresence, and it is not the God Jesus called Abba (Papa, Mommy).

Here is what we believe instead. Jesus was killed by the empire, for the reasons empires kill people: he threatened the order. He touched the untouchable, ate with the wrong people, called a peasant realm the kin-dom of God, and rode into the capital on a donkey mocking the governor's warhorse. Rome did what Rome did to people like that. The cross is not what God does to love. The cross is what empire does to love, and it has been doing it ever since, to Matthew Shepard on a fence and to every crucified body since.

And God was not the one holding the hammer. If the Christ is in the least of these, then the Christ was in the one being tortured, and the Presence that is everywhere was present in the nails and the thirst and the cry of abandonment. That is the only sense in which God "was in" the crucifixion: not as the one who required it but as the one who suffered it, with us, in solidarity with every person whom the powerful have ever destroyed for being who they are.

Womanist theologian Delores Williams said so succinctly and brilliantly, and I concur entirely, "there was nothing divine in the blood of the cross." Of course, divine life is in every life, but she meant and I agree that it was not a divine decision that someone must suffer in order that others might be found acceptable to God.

The last words in Luke are "Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Not "it is paid." Forgive them. Even here, the message is love, and love is the thing being crucified, but love can't ultimately die, can't be kept down or out or buried, and love keeps talking.

Holy Saturday: The Day Nothing Happens

There is one day in the church year with no liturgy. Between Friday and Sunday, the church is dark, the altar is bare, and nothing is scheduled. Holy Saturday is the day nothing happens. It is the day most people actually live in.

The disciples spent it hiding. Their teacher was dead, their movement was seemingly over, and they were, very possibly, next. Whatever they had believed on Thursday was gone by Saturday. They were not waiting for Easter. They did not know there would be one. They were just in a locked room, afraid, with nothing to do but wait for…???

Every person who has been in the closet knows Holy Saturday. Every person who has sat in a hospital waiting room, or beside a casket, or at a kitchen table after the phone call, knows it. It is the day after the worst thing and before whatever comes next, and there is no liturgy for it because there is nothing to say.

The old creeds say that on this day Christ descended to the realm of the dead. The Eastern icons show him in Sheol, breaking down the doors, taking the forebears by the hand. I do not read it literally, but I read it. It is Psalm 139 made into a picture: if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. The one day nothing happens is nevertheless in the Presence…not even in "stuck" or lonely places is the Presence not present. There's not a spot (or a when or a person) where God is not.

That is what we have to offer on Holy Saturday. Not a resolution. Company. The stone is still across the door. The room is still locked. And there's not a spot where God is not, including this one.

The Road

The subtitle of this chapter calls Lent the road to resurrection, and I want to end by taking the word "road" seriously.

A road is not a destination. It is the thing you walk on to get somewhere, and it is where most of the journey is spent. Lent is not the empty tomb. It is the forty days of walking toward a tomb (that you do not yet know is empty), toward the promise, toward hope, toward new beginnings. It is ashes and wilderness, disciplines and palms, a cross and a locked room. It is the part of the story the church would skip if it could, and every year it refuses to skip.

We refuse because you cannot practice resurrection if you have not walked the road. Easter without Lent is a party without a theme, a reason, without planning. The people who show up on Easter morning having spent forty days facing their mortality, clearing what clutters them, loosening their grip, walking through the week when love is crucified,

and sitting in the dark on Saturday: those people know what the empty tomb means. They have earned the alleluia. The road gave it to them.

And here is the strange grace of it: the road is where the Presence is, too. Not only at the end. In the ashes, in the wilderness, in the crucified, in the crucifiers, in the locked room. There's not a spot on the road to resurrection where God is not. That's why we walk it every year, and why, by Easter morning, we are ready to shine.

Chapter 13: Easter: Practicing Resurrection

Our sacred stories give us ways of expressing the hope that life is more than what we currently see and know. Our stories are human creativity and genius giving expression to our intuition that life is more than meets the eye.

Whether or not we take the stories literally, we see in them an affirmation that not only is life more than a few years in a body, but when we feel lifeless, broken, defeated, overwhelmed, dead-tired, and hopeless, there are new experiences of life waiting for us. Life is ubiquitous, life is everlasting, and life finds a way to be expressed.

The Stories We Have

Before we talk about what resurrection means, it helps to look at what the stories actually say, because, as with Christmas, the Easter most people carry in their heads is a blend that no gospel tells.

The earliest account is not in a gospel at all. It is in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, written in the 50s, some twenty years before Mark. Paul passes on what he says he received (supposedly in mystical ways from the undefeated spirit of Jesus, the resurrected Christ): that Christ died, was buried, was raised on the third day, and appeared to Peter, then to the Twelve, then to five hundred at once, then to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all to Paul himself. Notice what is not there. No empty tomb. No women. No stone. No garden. Not even a physical body. Paul first experiences the resurrected Christ as light and a voice. Paul does not touch wounds or scars. Paul has mystical experiences. It won't be until decades after Paul that stories of a physically resuscitated Jesus show up in our sacred texts.

Paul's resurrection is a series of appearances, and he includes his own encounter on the Damascus road, years after the others, in the same list, as the same kind of thing. Whatever Paul meant by "raised," it was something that could happen to him on a road in broad daylight. Others didn't need to have his exact experience for him to trust it, share it, and use it to define and guide his life.

Mark, the first gospel, ends strangely. Three women come to the tomb, find the stone rolled away and a young man in white who tells them Jesus is going ahead to Galilee. And then: “they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” That is the last verse. The oldest manuscripts stop there. No appearances. No risen Jesus. Just an empty tomb, a message, and three terrified women running away. Later scribes found this unbearable and added endings, but Mark himself left the reader standing at the open door.

Matthew adds an earthquake, guards, and an appearance on a mountain in Galilee. Luke has the road to Emmaus, where the risen Lord walks for miles with two disciples who do not recognize him until he breaks bread, and then vanishes. John has Mary Magdalene alone in the garden, mistaking him for the gardener, and Thomas, who will not believe until he touches the wounds. I like Thomas. Needing evidence isn’t a bad thing. Honest doubt is a part of true faith. The courage to doubt is the same courage that says to fearful friends, “Let us go with him even if we die with him” (John 11.16).

Each gospel tells it differently, and the differences are not small. Galilee or Jerusalem? One angel or one man? Two men or two angels? Did the disciples see him at all, or only hear that they would?

I lay this out not to undermine Easter but to free it. The stories do not agree on the details because they were never trying to be a police report or expert journalism. They were trying to say what it was like, for people who had watched their teacher die, to discover that for them, somehow, he was not gone. And every one of them says that discovery came with fear, confusion, non-recognition, and doubt before joy and confidence showed up. That, too, is the story. Resurrection does not arrive as certainty. It arrives as an open door that you may be afraid to walk through.

What Resurrection Can Mean

So what happened?

I do not know. What I can say is what I do not need to believe, and what I cannot stop believing.

I do not need to believe that a corpse got up. Resuscitation is not resurrection; the gospels themselves distinguish them. Lazarus was resuscitated, and he died again. Whatever happened to Jesus, the stories are clear that it was not a return to the old life. He appears and vanishes. He passes through locked doors. His closest friends do not recognize him. Paul, pressed on the question, says the resurrection body is a “spiritual body,” and admits he is reaching for words. The tradition itself never claimed that Easter was a resumption of what had been. It claimed that it was something new.

What I cannot stop believing is that the experiences were real. Something happened to those frightened people between Friday and the following weeks that turned them from a locked room into a movement that outlasted the empire that killed the one who inspired their movement. Marcus Borg distinguished the pre-Easter Jesus, the peasant from Galilee who lived and died, from the post-Easter living Christ, the Anointed One that the community continued to experience as alive, present, and transforming. The second is not a fiction built on the first. It is what the first became for the people who loved him, and it is what he has remained. I have met him. So have most of the people in our congregation, in ways they struggle to put into words, exactly as Paul struggled.

The empire did everything it could do. It tortured love to death and put it in a hole and sealed the hole (whether a private tomb or an open shared grave, which was the norm for crucifixion victims). But love cannot die, or if it does it cannot remain dead. And the Presence, which was in the man and in the movement and in every act of justice-love he had performed, was not limited to the grave, because there's not a spot where God is not.

Life is ubiquitous, life is everlasting, and life finds a way to be expressed. The stone was never going to hold.

That is what we celebrate. Not a biological anomaly. The failure of death to have the last word, in a peasant from Galilee and, we insist, in us.

Thich Nhat Hanh wrote, "We die so many times a day. And thanks to spiritual practice we also come back to life several times a day."

Spiritual practice. Practicing hope, practicing courage, practicing resilience, practicing a vision of justice-love: practice is what we need, and that's what we are doing as a worshiping community. We are practicing resurrection possibilities.

Why must we practice resurrection, resurrection hope, resurrection possibilities? Because there is no shortage of those who are practicing crucifixion.

Jesus touched the untouchable. He loved the unloved. He gave voice to the voiceless. He fed the hungry, and he told outcasts that he saw them and their innate dignity. He helped the sick and tired feel whole. In a crazy world, he helped people feel a bit saner. And in a world of empire, he dared to dream out loud about a divine kin-dom where the first are last and the last are first, where swords are never drawn and love is the law of the land. He threatened the status quo, and for that "crime," he was tortured to death. Why do we crucify love?

Love is being crucified even still. People, for who they are and for the love they share, for their innermost truth and their desire to live peacefully but not in shadows or silence, are under attack. In a world where love is crucified, it is our duty to practice resurrection.

When love is attacked, love louder. When the people we love are dehumanized, demonized, or demoralized, love them more fiercely. When hate roars, let love roar back. When the world seems to knock the life out of us, be determined to rise again. When the world wants to render us lifeless, frozen, let us live out loud anyway. When the world tries to bury us, let us be the angel that opens the graves for one another so that we can each reemerge into a realm of infinite possibilities.

Let us practice a spirituality that is life-giving and renewing and that is powered by justice-love. Keep rising, keep hoping, keep loving. Keep practicing resurrection.

Love is still being crucified. We are resurrection people, and we will see Love rise again and again. Easter says: Love wins!

I've Seen (and Experienced) Resurrection

Resurrection narratives symbolize the possibility of renewal.

I've seen churches that were facing extinction experience a revival of passion and purpose and become thriving faith communities again.

I've seen people who were rejected by their families form new families of choice that were loving, functional, joyful, and life-giving.

I've seen people who were not the best parents get a second chance and prove themselves to be absolutely heroic grandparents.

I've seen old emotional wounds finally heal.

I've seen people who dropped out of school go back fifty years later and finish what they started.

I've seen people accomplish in wheelchairs more than they ever did when they had stronger bodies.

I've seen people face their addictions and live in freedom.

I've seen people outlive their prognoses by decades.

I've seen victims transform into survivors, and then into helpers who show others how to survive.

I've seen people come out and live in the powerful truth of their gender identity or their sexual orientation and realize that what they once thought of as a problem is in reality a great blessing.

I've seen people who had no self-esteem come to believe that they are indeed God's miracle and not God's mistake!

> *As the pastor of Sunshine Cathedral in Fort Lauderdale, I have said for years in homilies and in marketing materials, "You are God's miracle and not God's mistake."*

Resurrections I Have Witnessed

The litany above is true in every line, and each line is a hundred faces. A book has room for a few of them, and they belong here, because a resurrection you can name is worth a dozen you can only assert.

I went to a church in East Texas as their new pastor. They had about 9 members. I was young and not yet jaded enough to know that 9 is practically dead. I was meant, I believe, to offer pastoral care in their final days. Instead, over two years, those 9 people grew to 49 and proved to be a thriving small church in a small town. Later, I would take a church in New Jersey of about 30 people. When I left 4 years later, it was a church of 80. When I came to my current parish (20 years ago as of this writing), the church was $300k in the red. In less than 5 years we were in the black. In the years that followed we have become a global presence via the Internet, have installed a columbarium/memorial chapel, have welcomed a Spanish speaking congregation to share our ministry and space, have fed tens of thousands of people each year, have featured a world class performing arts series, have purchased a house for LGBTQ young people needing a safe landing spot and clinical services to be able to thrive going forward, have become mortgage free, and have collaborated with dozens of like-minded organizations to improve the quality of life of people all over the world. If I believe in nothing else, I believe in resurrection.

Several years ago I performed a wedding for two wonderful men. One groom had his parents, sister, and nephew present; the other, had no one from his family of origin. He was a little down about it (but not at all surprised). I told him, “your relatives didn’t come, but your family did.” I meant his church, his friends, his in-laws, the people in his life who loved him for who he was rather than abandoning him for not being what they wanted him to be. For years thereafter he would say to me, “I’m estranged from my relatives but I so appreciate my family.”

People coming out as gay or lesbian or even as allies is pretty common. But some people are asexual or pansexual or transgender or nonbinary and their coming out stories are also powerful and life-giving. Even people “coming out” about their mental health issues, their neurodiversity, their HIV status, their abuse survival…whenever people get to tell their story and have it heard without judgement, one can see their relief, their healing, their true self coming to life. Too many times to count I have witnessed someone summoning the courage to say, “This is me” and then thriving because of the power of truth and self-affirmation. The resurrection of one’s authentic self is a miracle as much as any other.

I was called a sissy. A fag. Those words seemed mean but not entirely false. At 19 I had a spiritual experience where I “heard” (realized) that, “not even God can heal what is not sick.” The joy. The healing. The relief. The transformation. I am who I am meant to be!

That magic/sacred moment changed my life. I would never again believe the lie that the way I loved and the ones I loved made me unlovable to God. I gave God permission to strike me straight, but God, as omnipresent Love, was present in and as my love, and being true to my loving self brought to me the love of my life and the courage to share my story in ways that might help others celebrate their life and love. Love was the resurrection power that allowed me to embrace my Queer reality, my sacred queerness, my blessed life in the divine Rainbow community.

I include these not as proof but as testimony. Testimony is the fourth T in our stewardship (time, talent, treasure, and testimony), and it is the oldest form of Easter preaching. The women did not argue that the tomb was empty. They said: we went, I witnessed, and this is my experience. That is all any of us can say, and it has been enough for two thousand years.

Chapter 14: Pentecost: There's Not a Time or a Spot Where the Spirit Was Not

Pentecost is treated as if it were the birthday of the church. That's a bit of a stretch. The church wasn't born in a single instant on a particular day. Movements evolve, grow, and are usually underway before anyone thinks to call it a movement.

In the familiar story of Pentecost, St. Mary and the apostles are praying in an upper room in Jerusalem when suddenly a sound like wind and an experience like flames dancing on air takes place. We see that story in Acts 2.

Some will say that is the fulfillment of Jesus's promise of a helper that would come after him. He said he would pray and in response God would send a spiritual helper (John 14.16), and then people read the Pentecost story in Acts 2 and say, thar she blows!

But Luke and John aren't commenting on each other's work.

John's Jesus says a helping spirit will soon turn up, and that occurs for John in chapter 20 of his gospel when a spiritual vision has Jesus blowing on the apostles in hiding, and he says, "Peace be with you. Receive the holy breath (spirit)."

Acts isn't the answer to John's tale. John takes care of that himself. We can't use Luke to figure out what John meant.

The Bible has many authors over hundreds of years and it simply does not speak in a single voice; it is not univocal.

So, we have the spirit showing up in Luke as a dramatic experience, and we have the spirit showing up in John as an old friend breathing hope into frightened souls.

Both stories are written long after Jesus's departure from this life, and neither story is the debut of the spirit of God.

The spirit (wind, power, breath) of the holy one is found in the Hebrew scriptures.

We find in the 51st psalm that "spirit" is used in three ways in short succession.

"Create in me a steadfast spirit. Do not take your holy spirit away from me. Let a vigorous spirit sustain me."

A steadfast spirit, a spirit of wholeness or goodness, a sustaining spirit: this faithful, good, and sustaining spirit is in this ancient hymn long before Luke's Pentecost narrative in Acts or John's narrative of a posthumous Jesus showing up to breathe on people.

Genesis 1 shows a wind from God moving over the waters.

The prophet Joel has God saying, "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh."

Elisha craved the prophetic spirit Elijah had to be with him, as well; and prophets from Jericho once observed, "The spirit that was on Elijah is on Elisha."

Manifestations of spiritual comfort and empowerment are not unique to an upper room during a harvest festival in the book of Acts. They are experienced throughout scripture, throughout history, throughout our lives.

The spirit, the power, the moving force of Goodness, of love, of liberation can be experienced at almost any time.

Not only is spirit found in the Old Testament; in the New Testament we see the Spirit mentioned at least ninety times, including in the oldest gospel (Mark 1.7-8):

"One mightier than I is coming after me. I have immersed you in water; he will immerse you in the holy Spirit."

Immediately thereafter, Mark's Jesus sees the skies open and the spirit coming to rest on him like a dove. Mark writes that at least twenty years (and maybe closer to forty) before Luke's Pentecost narrative in Acts.

In John's gospel (7.38-39), we read that Jesus says rivers of living water flow from within, and then John parenthetically tells us that the water is a euphemism for spirit.

There's not a time or a spot where the spirit of God was not.

Whether the story had human breath, or a mighty wind, or the Jordan River, or living water flowing from the heart of Jesus, or divine power being transferred from one prophet to another, each experience of the spirit is holy; that is, each experience affirms wholeness, goodness, love.

Whether by wind or water or anointing, the spirit freshens us up, revives us, comforts us, helps us.

The thief comes to rob and destroy (John 10.10). Jesus came, in contrast, to offer abundant life (ibid.). The thief was a metaphor for political and religious domination, and Jesus's kin-dom of God was an alternative to toxic religion and imperial aggression.

Oppressive theologies and unfair policies come to rob human rights and destroy hope and goodwill, but the way of Jesus immerses us in the power of life, the presence of goodness, the energy of hope.

I'm not sure any of these stories happened exactly as they are told, but I am sure that love will outlast loathing, and hope can heal the pain of hate, and the spirit of goodness can and must and will prevail over efforts to shrink minds and harden hearts.

We have work to do if we are to be agents of healing in people's lives, and the work can leave us a bit tired now and then. But there is a renewing breath, a mighty wind, a descending dove, dancing flames, rivers of love flowing from our hearts, and we call that enlivening, uplifting, healing, refreshing power the spirit of God.

Every Language

There is one detail in Luke's story I want to take up, because it is the detail our church lives out every Sunday without always noticing.

When the wind and the flames come, the apostles begin to speak, and the crowd outside, pilgrims from every corner of the known world, Parthians and Medes and Elamites, people from Mesopotamia and Cappadocia and Egypt and Libya and Rome, each hears them in their own native language. Luke lists the nations at length, more than a dozen of them, and the point of the list is its length. Everybody heard. Nobody had to learn Aramaic first.

Some read Pentecost against Babel, the story in Genesis where human pride is punished by the confusion of languages, and it is hard not to. Babel scattered; Pentecost gathered. But notice how the gathering happens. The Spirit does not give everyone one language. It does not undo the diversity. It speaks every language at once, so that the diversity remains and the barrier falls. That is a very particular picture of what God's work in the world looks like: not uniformity, but a love that has learned every tongue.

That is why we sing Wesley and Sondheim and Mahalia Jackson and Hank Williams in the same hour. That is why the readings come from the Bible and the Tao te Ching and a physicist and a poet. That is why the vestments do not match. It is a congregation trying to do what the Spirit did in the story of the first Christian Pentecost: to speak to every person present in a language their heart already knows. The Presbyterian hears a hymn from home. The kid from a Baptist church hears gospel. The theatre person hears a show tune and, for the first time in years, feels that the church has room for what she loves. Every one of them hears, in their own language, the same thing: God is love, and you are God's miracle.

A church of one language would be easier to run. It would also be Babel with better acoustics.

The Spirit and the Body

The second thing about Pentecost is how physical it is.

Wind you can feel on your skin. Fire you can see and be warmed by. Flames dancing. Breath, in John's version, blown from one body onto others. Rivers of living water flowing from within. Oil poured on a head. A dove landing. Every image the Bible reaches for when it wants to talk about the Spirit is an image of something happening to a body in a way that can be felt.

This matters. Fear-based religion is, almost always, religion against the body. The body is the thing to be disciplined, covered, denied, and, for queer people especially, the thing whose desires are the proof of corruption. A church built by people who were condemned for their bodies cannot afford a disembodied spirituality. We had to learn, from the ground up, that the Spirit of God is not the enemy of flesh but its breath.

So our worship at Sunshine Cathedral is embodied, on purpose. We stand and sit and sing loudly. The final song is choreographed. People dance, raise hands, cross themselves. We touch each other at the passing of the peace. We eat and drink at the table. We pour water on people being baptized. The applause I described in the introduction is a bodily thing, hands striking hands, and it happens because bodies that were told to be ashamed have been told, for an hour, that they are very good.

Incarnation did not end at the ascension. Pentecost is the incarnation spreading: the same Presence that took a body in Galilee taking bodies in an upper room, and then in the street, and then in us. When we say we are the return of Christ, we mean it in the flesh. The Spirit does not float above the congregation. It is in the lungs of the person singing beside you.

Prayer for Pentecost

May cleansing spiritual flames warm our hearts and cast light on paths leading to joy.
May winds of wonder and gales of glory chase away our anxieties, regrets, and self-doubts.
May rivers of living water refresh us and heal us to be healers in the world.
May we receive the breath of infinite goodness,
and may that breath breathe through us to comfort all who are around us. Amen.

Chapter 15: Trinity: The Relational God

What is the Trinity? Using traditional and admittedly patriarchal language, the trinity is said to be father, son, and holy ghost. Now most people say holy spirit.

What about these three? Art would have us believe that they are two dudes and a bird. But that sort of idolatry is exactly what is discouraged in much of the Bible.

Eventually, church councils worked out that the Father, Son, and holy Spirit are one and the same, somehow. They are distinct, but unified, all one but still three, somehow (just trust us).

This doctrine isn't finally hammered out until about three hundred years after Jesus's death. Aramaic scholar Rocco Errico says God found out about the trinity in 325 AD.

The word trinity is not in the Bible, nor is a clear definition of a trinity, nor is there a command or even a request that anyone believe in a trinity.

Paul gives a blessing: the grace of Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the holy Spirit be with you, and Matthew imagines Jesus sending his disciples out to baptize people in the name of the Parent, the son, and the holy spirit. Matthew is writing fifty years after Jesus's execution, and even that "Great Commission" bit may have been a later addition by an editor.

That's what we find in scripture. Those committed to trinitarian theology will scrape together four or five more verses, but they are a bit of a stretch. They'll find verses where God is saying "we" and they insist that is a trinitarian reference. (Um, no.)

And the couple of verses that say "Father, son, and holy Ghost" give no indication that they are the same thing, give no hint how they are related to one another, and do not mention why this formula is absent except in these few and unrelated instances.

Still, within a hundred years of Jesus's time more and more people were talking about God and Jesus and the Spirit as if they were a package deal.

I think this is how the doctrine of the trinity might have evolved:

More and more people influenced by Greek philosophy are joining the movement, and in Greek thinking, gods can have children and form and faces, so applying Greek understandings to the Jewish Jesus and his Jewish God became more and more common.

Jewish people were fiercely monotheistic, and trinity sounds more pagan than Jewish, but followers of the Jesus Way were experiencing in Jesus the working of God, and that working or movement or power is called spirit.

The energy or movement of God in the Hebrew Bible is Ruach: spirit, power, wind, breath. Ruach Elohim moves over the waters of chaos to bring forth creation, for example (Genesis 1.2).

In ancient Judaism the Shekinah of God, divine glory, shows up at special times. Both Ruach and Shekinah are feminine, by the way.

St. Francis of Assisi had a vision of the Trinity as all female: mother, daughter, feminine spirit.

In those first few centuries of the Jesus movement, people knew God, and they met or learned about Jesus, and in the mix they felt something that could be identified as Spirit. How is it all related?

The trinitarian theology that was finally sorted out by 325 of the common era was likely an attempt to answer those questions while trying to preserve the claim of monotheism.

Jews, Muslims, and quite a lot of Christians never bought it, but trinitarian theology became the official teaching of the church, and now we have a good guess why.

To be clear, Jesus would have known nothing of a trinity and would be astounded to learn that in due course, he'd be considered part of one.

Decades and even centuries after Jesus, men (and I mean men) created the doctrine of the Trinity and it stuck.

I will, for the sake of tradition, baptize people using the trinitarian formula (inclusifying it to "in the name of the Creator, Christ, and holy Spirit"), but again, that formula doesn't describe a triune deity, and it was written centuries before the doctrine of the Trinity was codified.

The Johannine writings don't mention a trinity, but they do define God in three ways: as *love, light, and spirit.* We could say *love, wisdom, and liberating action.*

Three does signify wholeness, which we could call oneness: *top, middle, bottom; beginning, middle, end; first, last, always; past, present, future; spirit, soul, body; mind, idea, expression; creative impulse, creative action, creation; thinker, thought, thing.*

So, we see why some of us might feel at home with a three-pronged vocabulary for the divine. But still, while it may feel right or familiar or even empowering, when we really look at the three-in-one business it can seem like religious gobblety-gook.

And that might actually be good. The doctrine of the Trinity is incomprehensible, as is God. Any God you've figured out is just one more idol to be abandoned.

As long as it's a head scratcher it probably won't become a problematic idol for you.

Symbols that point beyond themselves can be useful; symbols that point to themselves are idols. The trinity is as good a symbol as any, but if we make it an idol, it becomes not dissimilar to other idols.

The Holy Trinity is the God that can't be fully known, that can be experienced but not explained, that can be felt but not accurately telt.

Another way of presenting the trinity, for those who wish to embrace, reclaim, or consider it, may be just this: the trinity is relationship.

Each member of the trinity needs the others, and as they cooperate, the whole world benefits. That's our model. We need one another, and as we lovingly cooperate, others benefit.

The Dance

The Cappadocian fathers, Basil and the two Gregorys, used a Greek word for the way the three relate: perichoresis. It means something like mutual indwelling, each in the others, none existing apart. But the word is built on a root that also gives us "choreography," and later writers could not resist the pun. The Trinity, they said, is a dance. Three partners, each moving around and through the others, none leading, none following, so that the dance itself is the thing and the dancers cannot be told apart from it.

I do not need the metaphysics behind that. I need the picture. A God who is not a solitary monarch on a throne but a movement of love between persons, so complete that the persons are the love and the love is God. If that is what "God is love" means at the deepest level, then love is not something God does. It is what God is made of, all the way down, before there was anything else to love.

And the picture has a consequence. If God is relationship, then the image of God in us is not a solitary thing either. We are made in the image of the dance. A human being alone, cut off, unrelated, is not the image of God; a human being in loving relation is. Which means the closet, the exile, the excommunication, every device for cutting people off from one another, is a defacing of the image. And the kin-dom, where everyone is related and no one is outside, is what the image looks like restored.

There is a famous icon by Andrei Rublev that shows the three visitors who came to Abraham at Mamre, seated around a table, and the Christian tradition has read it as the Trinity. What people notice about it is the open place. Three figures sit on three sides of the table, and the fourth side, the side facing the viewer, is empty. You are meant to sit there. The dance has a place set for you.

The trinity might be our blueprint. We are God incarnate, we are the return of Christ, we are the breath of the ancestors, we are all those things in right relationship offering help to heal the world. In that way, we are three in and as one.

The trinity may be simply the model of what we can be and ought to be. The trinity isn't what we venerate; it's what we try to emulate.

A Queer Symbol

Finally, what I do love about the trinity is that it is a marvelous Queer symbol.

Diverse and inclusive relationality is implied in the trinity. God is the universe, and God is kindness, and God is love. And within those categories, God is many more things: in fact, everything.

I said in chapter 2 what it means that the Christ stands in solidarity with all who suffer: that whatever is done to the least of these is done to Christ, and that solidarity makes the Christ Queer, Black, Trans, Latin, homeless, and every other thing the world has crucified. And this Queer Christ, in solidarity with all who suffer injustice, is in some way part of this trinitarian construction of the fourth century, making the Trinity queer, at least for those who identify as queer.

Beyond Simple Math

Let me say a little more about why, because it is not only a matter of who is in it.

Queer, at its root, means what does not fit the categories. It is the thing the boxes were not built for. And the Trinity is, before it is anything else, the doctrine that refuses to fit. One is three. Three is one. Not one god with three names, not three gods on a committee. The church spent centuries ruling out every explanation that would have made it add up, and kept the thing that does not.

That is a queer God by definition. A God who exceeds the binary of one and many. A God who cannot be pinned to a single gender, since the Hebrew Ruach and Shekinah are feminine and the Greek Logos is masculine and the Spirit blows where she (ruach) or it (pneuma) will. A God whose inner life is not a hierarchy but a dance. A God who is, in Francis' vision, mother and daughter and feminine spirit, and in the tradition's, father and son and holy ghost, and in ours, Creator and Christ and holy Spirit, and in none of these fully, because the naming always falls a bit short.

The Metaphysical Trinity, according to Charles Fillmore is Mind/Idea/Expression; according to Malinda Cramer it is Creator/Creative Action/Creation. It's still the One Power known and experienced in different ways.

For people who have spent their lives being told that they do not fit, that they are neither one thing nor the other, that their love is the wrong shape and their bodies are the wrong kind, there is an odd comfort in a God who does not fit either. The doctrine that the church guarded most jealously turns out to be a doctrine of holy nonconformity. The straight line was never God's shape.

God, unbound by tradition, binaries, prejudices, biology, doctrine, or politics; God that is male and female and both and neither; God who is love that is free to love without condition or reservation; God that can't even be constrained by simple math: if ever there was a queer symbol, it is the triune god, the relational god, the divine dance, the god beyond definition or explanation.

However you imagine God: mother, father, friend; lover, electrical current, nature; love, light, breath of life; one, three-as-one, all-in-all: as long as that vision is the picture of ultimate goodness, then I think you've probably gotten it right enough. Remember, symbols point beyond themselves, not to themselves. With that in mind, the Trinity is as a good a symbol as any, but when it points to itself, it can easily become an idol meant to keep us from looking beyond and forward. It becomes a shrine that we say we want but we don't know what we're talking about (e.g. Peter in the Transfiguraration story).

What all the symbols, at their best, point to is love, also known as "God."

Chapter 16: Pridetide: A Sunshine Cathedral Season

Why a Church Would Add a Season

The liturgical calendar is old, and it has the perceived authority of old things. Advent and Lent, Easter and Pentecost, the feasts of saints and the long green weeks: these were fixed, in most of their outlines, more than a millennia ago, and churches tend to receive them the way they receive the creeds, as given.

At Sunshine Cathedral we have added a season. The month of June is Pridetide. The altar is dressed in the colors of the rainbow flag. The homilies take up what it means to be a queer person in, of, and as God. If Pentecost falls in June, as it often does, we celebrate Pentecost in Pridetide, and nobody thinks that is strange. Visitors might (but none have said so far).

Guess what. Every season was made up. Christmas was placed on December 25 in the fourth century, likely to sit on top of a Roman festival of the sun. Lent grew from a few days of fasting before Easter into forty over several centuries. Trinity Sunday was not universal until 1334 (and the doctrine of the Trinity wasn't official until 325). Even Sunday itself, as the Christian day of worship, was a decision people made. The church calendar is not divinely revealed. It is the accumulated wisdom of communities deciding which stories were worth living through every year.

And the stories the calendar tells are, all of them, stories of individuals and communities. Passover is the story of a people freed from slavery. Advent is the story of a dominated people waiting. Pentecost is the story of a community getting their second wind and getting fired up. The Christian year is the church saying: this is our faith story and we can't forget it because we continue to live it.

Pridetide is our church saying the same thing about a story the older calendar never told. It is the story of a people who were told they had no place in the house of God, and who found out otherwise. That story is as real as any sacred narrative. It deserves a season. So we gave it one.

Stonewall as Sacred Story

Every season has a founding narrative. Pridetide's is the Gay Liberation Movement, signified by Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) first worship service on October 6, 1968 and the Stonewall Uprising almost 9 months later.

In the early morning of June 28, 1969, NYC police raided the Stonewall Inn, a bar in Greenwich Village where gay men, lesbians, drag queens, and trans people gathered because they were unwelcome or unsafe in other places. Raids were routine. Patrons were arrested, humiliated, beaten, and their names printed in the papers so they would lose their jobs. This time, for reasons no one has ever fully explained, they did not go quietly. Somebody threw something. The crowd outside grew. The police barricaded themselves. The rioting continued, on and off, for several nights. The people the city had spent decades pushing into the dark stood in the street and refused to go back in.

A year later, on the anniversary, a few thousand people marched from the Village up Sixth Avenue in what was called Christopher Street Liberation Day. It was the first Pride march. That same weekend similar events took place in Los Angeles and Chicago. There are now thousands of marches, block parties, and parades for Pride on every continent, and the month of June belongs to those reclaiming their pride, their dignity, and their joy.

This is a sacred tale. The Bible is full of stories in which a despised people stands up and the powers that oppressed them are, for a night, unable to hold them down. The midwives who defy Pharaoh. The enslaved persons who walk out of Egypt. The peasants waving branches at a man on a donkey while the governor's chariot and steeds ride in splendor on the other side of town. Stonewall belongs in that company. It was not planned, not led, not respectable. It was the least of these, in Jesus' accounting, deciding that they were done being afraid. If the Spirit is the power of liberation, and the Pentecost chapter argued that it is, then the Spirit was on Christopher Street that night.

Allow me to loop back to the first MCC service in 1968. It consisted of twelve people in Troy Perry's living room in an LA suburb: 11 men and a woman, 11 Christians and a Jew, 11 queer folk and a straight ally, all hearing for perhaps the first time that God loved them as they were. The church, for once in its history, got there first.

A Feast of Coming Out

Chapter 2 said that the resurrection is a coming-out story: a stone rolled away, a life the world thought was finished stepping into the morning light. Pridetide is the season we live that story as our own.

Every feast in the year has a movement. Advent waits; Christmas welcomes; Epiphany reveals; Lent journeys; Easter rises; Pentecost speaks. Pridetide's movement is coming out. It is the season of walking toward yourself, of lech lecha, of leaving the closet that somebody else built and standing in the sun. We celebrate people who have done it, we hold people who are still trying, and we remind everyone, over and over, that coming out is a gift to yourself and living your truth is a gift to the world.

The rainbow is our sign, even if we must share it with Genesis. In the story of the flood, when the waters recede, the rainbow is seen and it is said that it signifies a divine promise that such a thing (as a mighty global flood) will not occur again. Of course, a rainbow is just light hitting airborne water droplets and then being reflected, refracted, and dispersed; but, just as readers make meaning, so do observers. The natural phenomenon can offer a spiritual message or at least we can choose to see the natural event as a spiritual opportunity.

Gilbert Baker, who designed the rainbow flag in San Francisco in 1978, was not thinking of Noah. But the church that flies his flag over its altar in June can hardly avoid it. The rainbow is a promise that the drowning is over. Whatever has been done to you in the name of God, the sign in the clouds says it will not be done again, not here.

That is the theology of the season. What follows are four essays I have written over the years on the question that Pridetide, sooner or later, always has to answer: what about the Bible? I have kept them as they were written, because each takes the question from a different angle, and because the question keeps being asked.

Doesn't the Bible Condemn Homosexuality?

Doesn't the Bible condemn homosexuality? The short answer is, no.

The Bible certainly records human fears and prejudices, as well as human hopes and resilience, but the Bible, as a whole, isn't about condemnation.

The Bible is a collection of stories, songs, sermons, sayings, poems, and prayers covering centuries and continents and even a few languages. It is a rich and wonderful anthology that invites readers to think and feel, explore and imagine, heal and grow. Considering this understanding of our sacred texts, it would be difficult to think of them as being condemnatory.

Lifted from the larger narrative or divorced from cultural, linguistic, literary, or historical contexts, any sentence or phrase from scripture can be used to endorse or vilify almost anything imaginable. That is not, however, the most faithful way to engage the Bible.

Relationship, hope, courage, generosity, second chances, compassion, and love are the values that are repeatedly featured in our scriptures.

One can easily enough deconstruct and challenge the few Bible verses that have often been used to demonize same-gender-loving people. Moreover, one can without too much effort find several hints of same-gender love and attraction occurring in scripture, and even seemingly being affirmed; however, I am at a point in my life and ministry where I don't need a Bible verse to defend my sacred value nor a Bible story to justify my experience of life. I simply trust that God is good, that love is holy, and that life is diverse. Same-gender-loving people are, first and foremost, loving people, and love is not condemned in the Bible; indeed, love is the biblical litmus test for what is holy.

In the Bible we find exhortations to welcome strangers, be good neighbors, forgive one another, care for the vulnerable, pray for others (including those who are unkind to us), treat others as we would wish to be treated, not judge others unfairly, live humbly and show mercy and work for justice. All of these are demonstrations of love. We find in the Bible that "the fruit of the Spirit is love." In fact, Jesus is recorded as having said that his followers could be identified by their loving actions. He also said love was the greatest of all commandments.

For me, the message of love is the biblical message and mandate, and love does not condemn love. Love does not diminish people. Love does not seek to deny justice or dignity or safety to anyone. Love does not suggest that anyone is unworthy of or beyond the reach of love.

Does the Bible, an anthology of writings whose running theme is love, condemn same-gender-loving people? As someone who has spent my life studying, teaching, wrestling with, and even playing with the Bible, I must say unequivocally, it does not.

Is It a Sin to Be Gay?

Is it a sin to be gay?

"Sin" means to miss the mark (an archery and hunting metaphor). To "be" anything is a matter of ontology (of "is-ness"). So, to discover that one is something and to be honest about it can never be missing the mark.

Did Jesus condemn homosexuality?

Jesus condemned precious little. One of the few things that he did condemn was the tendency of religious people to participate in condemnation! Jesus seemed to have a great deal of patience with almost everything other than self-righteous people who tried to enforce religious rules in a way to oppress or control others.

When was Jesus sympathetic to homosexual persons?

First, let's not force a Euro-centric, nineteenth-century view of same-gender love/attraction onto the first-century, Palestinian Jesus. The word "homosexual" would not have been part of Jesus's vocabulary, and our understanding of homosexuality might not have even existed in Jesus's world. However, you may recall that in the eighth chapter of Matthew's gospel (and the story is repeated in the seventh chapter of Luke's gospel) Jesus heals a centurion's servant. The original hearers of that story would have assumed that the servant was the centurion's lover. From what we know of first-century Roman culture, we know that such relationships were not uncommon. And for a person of such high rank to be so concerned about a servant that he would approach a faith healer of lower status in a desperate attempt to help his servant suggests an intimacy far greater than one would expect between a military officer and his "servant." How did Jesus respond to the centurion? He praised his faith! His relationship was not condemned or even questioned.

What are the other examples of Jesus being friendly toward gay people?

In Matthew 19, Jesus defines "eunuchs" in a much broader sense than we normally hear. He says that there are those who are castrated, which is the usual definition. But he also says there are two other kinds of eunuchs. He said some "choose" to be eunuchs (living a life of celibacy) and that others are "born" eunuchs (people who by nature, or from birth, are sexually different). He also said that not everyone would accept his broad and inclusive (and non-judgmental) definition of eunuchs, but he said, "Whoever can accept this ought to accept it."

Jesus was giving an example of sexual diversity. He did not suggest that anything was wrong with any of the "eunuchs," and he certainly did not propose an "ex-eunuch" program. Some of us are "different" from the majority, and Jesus seems to suggest that it's OK, and that everyone who can accept such diversity ought to accept it. His teaching reminds us of Isaiah 56, where the prophet places these words in the mouth of God: "The eunuch need not say, 'I am a dry (barren) tree.' I will give them in my house a monument and name which will be even better than having children; an eternal, imperishable name. For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." In any case, Jesus never condemned same-sex love or attraction.

Aren't there Bible verses that say it is a sin to be gay?

Not exactly. It depends on how you read the Bible. The people who wrote the documents that in time became our Bible were products of their time and culture. They had specific agendas and were writing to particular communities, usually in response to definite events. None of them had any idea that twenty-first-century Americans would be reading their work. In fact, none of them knew there was a North American continent or that the world wasn't flat.

And so, we do read statements in the Bible that support slavery, that assume women are in some way inferior to men, that seem to suggest God takes sides in bloody military conflicts. Today, we do not accept that women are in any way inferior to men. Today, we believe slavery to be one of the greatest evils of human history. Today, many of us believe that war is almost never the will of God. Do we read the Bible with an awareness of its historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts? Or do we cling to isolated verses that seem to support one prejudice or the other? How we choose to read the Bible will determine if we believe the Bible promotes homophobia.

What about Sodom and Gomorrah?

Some people will suggest that Genesis 19 condemns homosexuality. It is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, where a gang of violent men threaten to rape two strangers. The strangers happen to be angels (and presumably male), but the obvious "sin" of the story has nothing to do with the genders of the characters. Rape is always brutal, inhuman, horrifying, terrible, and wrong. No one could disagree with that. There isn't any love or even healthy attraction in the story. Degrading or hurting someone by forcing them to perform any sexual act against their will demands our outrage. But that has nothing to do with gay people finding joy in their mutual relationships.

Doesn't Leviticus say it's wrong to be gay?

Leviticus discourages certain behaviors, but its writers have no clue that sexuality might be biologically predisposed or that it might be a psycho-social orientation. So, no, Leviticus doesn't condemn any contemporary notion of homosexuality because it is not aware of any such notion. The book lays out many prohibitions for an ancient community. Those prohibitions include wearing certain types of fabric, eating shellfish and pork, even getting tattoos! Leviticus 19.26 says it is wrong to eat rare meat. Isn't it funny that people who think Leviticus justifies their anti-gay prejudices have no problem eating seafood or rare steaks or adorning themselves with body art?

Are there any other biblical passages to consider?

Not many. Out of the entire Bible, sixty-six books (a few more if you're Roman Catholic) written by many people covering a period of multiple centuries, we've already discussed half the passages that are routinely used to shame, condemn, harass, or terrorize gay and lesbian people! The other three passages come from books attributed to St. Paul in the New Testament (most notably, two verses from the first chapter of Romans, which is almost always taken out of context and even misquoted; the context for the Romans 1 passage is idolatry, not sexual orientation). Each of those passages, when taken in their cultural, historical, linguistic, and literary contexts, can be deconstructed in ways that are actually quite liberating for same-gender-loving people!

The Bible is not meant to condemn love, mutuality, or any life-affirming condition.

Homosexuality and the Bible

What does the Bible say about homosexuality?

What the Bible or any sacred text says about human sexuality has little relevance in civil discourse. Human rights, liberty, and equality cannot be denied because of narrow interpretations of ancient texts.

The ancient people represented in the Bible probably didn't share our contemporary, scientific understandings of human sexuality. For that matter, they believed the world was flat, often blamed natural disasters on divine wrath, believed that women and children were secondary in status to adult men, and assumed that slavery was a natural part of the social order. I disagree with each of these ancient opinions, and I would also disagree with any opinion that denied the sacred value of same-gender-loving people.

I find nowhere in scripture where mutual attraction or committed love (regardless of the genders involved) is condemned. The very few and isolated passages that are used as anti-gay texts always seem to be condemning sexual acts associated with violence or exploitation, never consensual, adult relationships.

Moreover, the prime theme of the gospels can be summed up in the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. Jesus himself is quoted as saying the whole of scripture ("the Law and the Prophets") rested on that truth. On another occasion he said the greatest of all commandments were simply to love God and to love one's neighbor.

Jesus's inclusive and progressive view of how scripture should be used certainly makes room for genuine, mutual love and attraction regardless of the genders involved and, his view would also seem to condemn violence and bigotry used to hurt anyone for any reason.

The Bible isn't a rule book to be used to justify prejudices. When the Bible is reduced to a legalistic code to exclude, control, or condemn others, it is diminished, and the religion of love it is meant to promote is weakened and cheapened.

Are there biblical texts to support a gay-affirming position?

As a thinking person, I don't need "proof-texts" to justify my opinions. However, there are scriptures that easily lend themselves to support pro-LGBTQ views. I could mention times when same-gender love is featured in the Bible and even praised. Jonathan's love for David leaps to mind, as do the Centurion and his "servant" in Matthew's gospel (chapter 8, and repeated in Luke's gospel). Critical readings show that these relationships could have been romantic. But again, I don't need biblical justification for my own thoughts, opinions, and lived experiences. We have learned many things since the days of the Bible, and we can use that knowledge as well as our own independent thinking when approaching the Bible.

What should be the Christian response to the gay or lesbian lifestyle?

The first thing would be to not insult same-gender-loving people by reducing their life and love to a "style" of life or a "choice." I doubt very seriously if most people choose their sexual orientation. Most people are either gay or straight or bisexual or pansexual or asexual as a matter of ontology; they don't choose their sexual orientation, they discover it. The choice is whether to live openly as the person one is.

However, for those who "choose" to be honest about their innate sexual orientation and live proudly as the people they are, I would hope they would be treated with dignity and respect, by Christians and non-Christians alike. We cannot love our neighbor if we have already prejudged him or her to be disordered, sinful, or inferior.

Examining Texts Homophobic Christians Are Fond of Quoting

Leviticus 18.22, Leviticus 20.13, Romans 1.26-27, and 1 Corinthians 6.9-10 are probably the most often quoted passages used against LGBT people. First Timothy 1.10 and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 are also often used. There is also the ridiculous trope, "It's Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." Let's look at them.

Deconstructing (and possibly redeeming) these passages is a purely academic exercise for me. I do not do it out of a need to be validated by the Bible. The Bible, as much as I love it and as central as it has always been to my life, is all the same a collection of human documents. I do not give the Bible final authority over my life, nor do I believe it to be divinely authored. Still, the Bible is part of my consciousness, part of my spiritual DNA,

and studying it, wrestling with it, deconstructing and reconstructing it have all enriched my life significantly, and it remains for me sacred literature if not "divine" literature.

The humans who wrote the Bible were often wrong about history, science, and even ethics, and yet, in all their frailty and faults they bravely and honestly tried to find meaning in life and they sought to understand their relationship to the Source of life, often called "God." It is their courageous and honest searching that empowers and encourages my own search. I don't read the Bible because it is infallible; I read it because the people who wrote it were asking important questions and many of those same questions are my questions, so it remains an important and relevant text for my life.

Now, for the passages in question.

1. Genesis 19. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is a strange text to use as an argument on any moral issue. Lot (the "hero" of the story) is willing to sacrifice his daughters to a rape gang. From the moment we see that, the story loses any moral authority we may have assumed it had.

By the end of the story, our "hero" again behaves in reprehensible ways by committing incest with both of his daughters. A story of attempted rape followed by incest where the "protagonist" is willing to be an accomplice in his own daughters' rape and later commits incest with them is hardly a story that can be credibly used to condemn same-gender love or attraction.

Of course, mutual attraction or consensual mating rituals are nowhere in the story, so again, to use a story of such horrific violence to condemn the consensual, adult relationships that occur between persons of the same gender is at best ridiculous and at worst nefarious.

Finally, the story ends at the conclusion of the chapter by telling us that the Moabites and the Ammonites are the descendants of the incestuous unions between Lot and his daughters, and THAT I believe is the point of the story.

The story isn't meant to condemn same-gender love but is rather a bizarre sort of fairy tale insulting the writer's perceived enemies, the Ammonites and Moabites. The writer accuses them of being entire races born from incest.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah shows what strange series of events could lead a father to be isolated in a cave with his daughters and why they would initiate sex with him so they could procreate. The attempted rape of angels, the willingness for Lot to sacrifice his daughters, the unfortunate death of Mrs. Lot all lead to where/when/why Lot and his daughters had their unholy unions. A myth to be sure, but a myth meant to make the insult that "our" enemies are innately damaged and flawed because they are the products of incest seem plausible.

2. Leviticus. These passages are just annoying. They come from a legal code of an ancient (and now defunct) theocracy. They are in a book that doesn't allow women in the house of worship for weeks after giving birth, that forbids tattoos, that condemns the wearing of mixed fabrics, that forbids the eating of shellfish and pork, and so on. I've never met a single Christian who takes any of Leviticus as a divine mandate for their lives, except when it comes to the two isolated passages that can be used to justify homophobia.

3. Romans 1. A fascinating passage. In it St. Paul says that people who worship "idols" have earned a strange curse from God: God will confuse their nature, and they will behave sexually in ways that they otherwise wouldn't. For Paul, homosexuality isn't the sin; it's the punishment for the sin (of idolatry)!

Of course, I disagree with Paul, but what is funny (and tragic) is that a passage that clearly condemns idolatry is used to make an idol of heterosexuality. Secondly, if it is bad to have one's nature changed, as Paul suggests, then wouldn't it be bad for someone who is as a matter of ontology "gay" to then try to change his/her nature and become heterosexual (as if it were even possible)?

Still, Romans 1 condemns idolatry and says that some who commit that sin have been cursed with being turned gay (they were presumably straight before that). It's an odd passage that paints a strange picture of God, and one that does not have any contemporary understanding of human sexuality.

The other two Pauline passages I mentioned (one Pauline and one deutero-Pauline; no credible scholar believes any longer that Paul wrote the letters to Timothy) seem to be condemning temple prostitution.

The bottom line is that mutual attraction, consensual relationships, or committed partnerships are never condemned in the Bible (they aren't even mentioned), and if they were condemned, we've learned a thing or two in the last few thousand years and we would be free to disagree.

Joshua makes the sun stand still, but we don't believe the sun travels. The book of Revelation mentions specifically the four corners of the earth, and yet a round earth has no corners. The two creation myths that open the Bible contradict each other on almost every point; one wonders WHICH creation story the "creationists" believe to be literal. Paul sends the runaway slave Onesimus back to his oppressor, Philemon, an act which surely horrifies modern readers. I for one don't believe that a ninety-year-old Sarah had a baby, and I don't know of a single fundamentalist who believes Leviticus's dietary prohibitions apply to them.

Finally, I just don't believe the Bible is a good enough excuse to hate anyone. We disagree with other parts; why not disagree with the (only) six passages that seem to be

homophobic? And, on closer inspection, even those passages don't address honest, mutual attraction or sexual orientation as we understand it today.

The Last Word of the Season

Four essays, and the same conclusion each time: the Bible does not condemn love, and I do not need it to bless mine.

That second half is the part I most want a reader to carry out of Pridetide. The first half, the deconstruction of the six passages, is useful. People need it, especially people who are still in the argument with a parent or a pastor or the voice in their own head. But the argument can become its own closet. You can spend your whole life proving that Leviticus does not mean what they said it means, and never once ask whether you needed Leviticus's permission in the first place. As I have said in three of the four preceding essays, I do not. I say it again here, at the end of the season, because it is the point of the season. I trust that God is good, that love is holy, and that life is diverse. That trust does not rest on a verse. It rests on the omnipresence: on the fact that there is not a spot where God is not, and that I am one of the spots, and so are you, and no book, however sacred, was ever handed the authority to say otherwise.

Coming out is walking toward yourself. Pridetide is the month the church walks with you. And when the rainbow comes down from the altar at the end of June, the promise it stood for (Never again - Not here) does not.

Chapter 17: The Feasts We Keep

The great seasons carry the story of the year. But a congregation's identity shows in the smaller days, the ones no lectionary accommodates, the ones a church keeps because of who its people are. A church of veterans keeps Memorial Day. A church of farmers keeps harvest. A church of Irish immigrants keeps St. Patrick's Day.

Here are some of the days Sunshine Cathedral keeps, and why.

World AIDS Day: December 1

No day on our calendar carries more weight for the people who have been here longest. There was a decade when queer communities (including spiritual communities) buried its own members faster than it could receive new ones, when the young men who sang in the choir in January were in an urn by December, and when many churches would not hold

their funerals and too often their families wouldn't attend the funerals wherever they were held.

At Sunshine Cathedral we observe World AIDS Day with special prayers, the eucharist celebrated with special intentions for the departed and survivors, and with a homily that names AIDS and tells its story. Also, most years, we get a panel from the AIDS Quilt and hang it on a wall in the worship center. Year round, on our side altar, we feature an "AIDS Candle".

We do not tell that story as history. We tell it as testimony. The plague took a generation, and the ones who survived it built what we have. They learned, in those years, what the church is for: to sit with the dying when no one else will, to feed the sick, to say the names. Whatever you did to the least of these. We remember whom we did it to, and whom we failed.

Transgender Day of Remembrance: November 20

Each year the names of trans people killed in the previous twelve months are read aloud in churches, community centers, and public squares around the world. The list is long, and it is disproportionately Black and brown trans women. Most were killed by someone they knew.

A church that reads the Epiphany magi as gender-nonconforming and calls the Trinity a queer symbol has an obligation on this day. The obligation is to stand where the Christ is standing, and on November 20 that is at the grave of every person on the list. We read the names because Matthew 25 asks whether we saw them, and reading the names is the smallest way of saying that we did.

Transgender Day of Visibility: March 31

We mustn't only care about Transgender and non-binary people when they are harmed, we need to see and affirm them while they can know that we do. Transgender people are unique and complex and a wonderful demonstration of divine diversity and cosmic creativity. The Day of Visibility is a time to honor and bless our transgender siblings.

Pulse: June 12

On June 12, 2016, a gunman killed forty-nine people at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, on Latin night. It was, at the time, the deadliest mass shooting in American history, and it happened three hours from our door, in the middle of Pridetide.

One of our staff clergy drove to Orlando for an ecumenical event while in Fort Lauderdale we had a prayer service for the victims, the survivors, and even for the killer.

We keep the day because the dead were ours: young, mostly Latin, mostly queer, dancing on a Saturday night in the one kind of room where they ought to have been safe. It was their sanctuary, their communal home, their sacred space and it was violated and desecrated by hatred and violence. The Stonewall Inn was a bar. Pulse was a bar. The places where our people have been safest have historically not been churches, and the day reminds a church what it has to become.

National Coming Out Day: October 11

A lighter day, and a needed one. It was set in 1988 on the anniversary of the 1987 March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. On or near this day we use the homily and liturgy to celebrate coming out into the light and living one's truth out loud.

Chapter 2 and chapter 16 have said what coming out means in our theology. This is the day we remember that the door is open in both directions, for those coming out and for those coming home.

All Saints and All Souls: November 1 and 2

The old feast of the church, and one of the few we keep mostly as the tradition gives it. We remember the departed. Candles are lit for departed loved ones. The columbarium and memorial chapel hold the ashes of our own. We pray a litany of Queer saints. We remember that bodies wear out but Spirit never does.

I said in the Lent chapter that theatre ghosts gave me permission to entertain other spirits: angels, ancestors, saints. All Saints is the day the permission is liturgical. The energy of the people who built this place is not destroyed. Some of it, at least for a while, remains near the stage where it took form. On the first or second of November we remember those whose presence we still feel in our hearts, and whose loving actions continue to bless us still.

Reign of Christ: The Last Sunday Before Advent

The last Sunday of the church year. The tradition calls it Christ the King Sunday but many progressive churches, and we are among them, choose a less hierarchical, less patriarchal, less militaristic way of understanding the occasion…we say Reign of Christ, and we mean the kin-dom, the peasant on the donkey, the one whose realm is not imperial but it is in our common, ordinary, and yet sacred hands. It's the reign (not the rule) of Christ (the Christ Light, the Christ Nature, the Christ Principle, the Logos, the spirit of wisdom). A ruler commands and dictates and punishes; a contemporary sovereign is symbolic, ceremonial, unifying, diplomatic, present in hymns and on money but doesn't make demands or limit

freedoms. Christ (the inner light) reigns (guides, inspires, reminds, symbolizes, draws, encourages). And on this last Sunday before Advent we celebrate this joyful truth.

It is the day we close the year by saying, once more, that Jesus, ironically, is Lord of a non-kingdom, an anti-empire, a global family…he's not a boss but a patron, not an oppressor but an elder brother, not a task master but a symbol and example of justice-love.

Juneteenth: June 19

It falls in Pridetide, and we keep it there. The day the last enslaved people in Texas learned they were free, two and a half years after the proclamation that freed them. Liberation delayed is the story of the day, and it is a story our congregation knows in its own idiom. A church that reads Stonewall as Exodus cannot skip the American Exodus, and must become not merely non-racist (which is usually not as true as people wish it were) but actively anti-racist.

"For freedom Christ has set us free" and yet still far too few people know this. We must work tirelessly to get the good news proclamation to them: you are God's miracle and not God's mistake.

Racism, misogyny, xenophobia, heterosexism, Transphobia, etc. are antithetical to the good news of all inclusive, unconditional love in whose image we are made and in whose presence we ALL live and move and have our being.

Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday: Sunday Closest to Third Monday of January

Chapter 22 lists Dr. King among the spiritual humanists whose vision we share. One Sunday every January we read him, and we do not read him softly. The beloved community is the divine kin-dom in an American accent, and the Letter from Birmingham Jail was addressed to clergy who preferred order to justice. It is addressed to us, every year, and we let it be.

Thanksgiving and the Holidays

We ask for a little more at Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter, as chapter 27 admits. We also give a little more.

For Thanksgiving we host a potluck meal for the community. For some, it is their "other" thanksgiving, for others, it is their only or primary thanksgiving. The Cathedral furnishes some items, individuals bring more dishes, people who can't contribute are

welcome with no questions asked, and we gather in gratitude for the good we've known, for good still to come, and for the blessed moment of gathering and sharing.

Soon after (first Saturday in December) we have our annual Sunshine Cathedral Holiday Concert - Free admission as a gift to the community (offerings are received).

One Christmas Eve we offer two worship services (7 pm & 9 pm) and on Christmas Day (if it isn't a Sunday) we stream a pre-recorded Xmas Day service online.

Finally, the last Sunday of the year involves a reflection on the year closing and prayers for the year approaching.

For a congregation in which many members were disowned, the holidays are not neutral. They are the days the absence is loudest. The church becomes, on those days, the family of choice that chapter 13 says it has watched form again and again.

Why We Keep Them

Every one of these days has the same shape. A people who were not seen are seen. Names that were not said are said. A story the larger calendar did not tell is told, in the room, with candles.

That is what a feast is for. The great seasons tell us that there is a Love that will never and can never let us go. The feasts we keep tell us who we are, and they tell the person who has just walked in for the first time, still bracing for the moment when it turns out to be like all the others: this church remembers people like you. It has been remembering them for a long time. Welcome home.

Part Three: The Streams

Chapter 18: Progressive Christianity

Progressive Christianity is open, investigative, fluid, evolving, and starts from the premise that every person has sacred value.

Where It Came From

The phrase is newer than the thing. Christians have been reading the Bible critically, welcoming the insights of science, and insisting that the gospel is about justice for a long time; the eighteenth-century Unitarians did it, the nineteenth-century liberal Protestants did it, Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel movement did it at the turn of the

twentieth century, when they said the realm of God was a matter of wages and housing and not only of the afterlife. Every generation of the church has had a wing that said the tradition must grow or die.

What we now call Progressive Christianity took its name and its shape in the 1990s. In 1985 a New Testament scholar named Robert Funk gathered a group of colleagues into what became the Jesus Seminar, which spent years working through the gospels, saying by saying, and voting, with colored beads, on what the historical Jesus was likely to have said. The method was theatrical and the press loved it, but the substance was serious: a generation of scholars, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan among them, bringing the best of a century's research to ordinary readers in ordinary language. Borg's Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time did for the pew what the seminar had done for the academy.

Around the same time an Episcopal priest in Washington, James Adams, founded what became the Center for Progressive Christianity. He was tired of watching thoughtful people leave the church because the only public Christianity they could see was fundamentalist. He drafted a set of points, originally eight, that a church could adopt to say: we are Christians, and we are not that. The points were revised over the years and condensed to five in 2022. Sunshine Cathedral was a member of the Center for years and still measures itself against the points.

In the late 1980s liberal priest Barbara C. Harris became the first woman bishop in the worldwide Anglican Communion. In 1984 Bible Scholar Phyllis Trible published Texts of Terror which challenged problematic, violent texts in the Bible rather than uncritically embracing them. And in 1993 defrocked Jesuit gay priest John J. McNeill released The Church and the Homosexual affirming the LGBTQ children of God.

Bishop John Shelby Spong, meanwhile, was writing books with titles like Why Christianity Must Change or Die, and getting into more trouble than any of them, and drawing crowds. What he and Borg and Crossan and Adams had in common was not a new doctrine but a new permission. They said, out loud and in print, what a great many clergy had believed for decades and kept to themselves: that you could love Jesus and not believe in a literal virgin birth; that the Bible was a human book, inspired the way all great human books are inspired; that the church's treatment of women, of gay people, of other faiths, was not faithfulness but failure.

That permission is what Progressive Christianity gave us. The rest we had to build.

The Five Points

The tenets of Progressive Christianity are (based on information at ProgressiveChristianity.org):

Jesus's teachings and example can lead to wholeness and communion with all life, as can other traditions and pathways. The Christ Way is our way, not the only possible way.

This is the first point and the one that most sharply divides progressive from evangelical Christianity. Jesus is our option, the one we have chosen and the one we follow, and this point declines to say that everyone else is lost. There is a difference between a path and the path. We walk this one because it is ours, because it was handed to us, because we have experienced the Christ on it. That does not require us to believe that the Buddhist or the Jew or the Sufi have met nothing on theirs. The magi found the child by a star and their own esoteric arts; the story does not say they converted. The omnipresence is not confined to the churches that name it.

The ideal spiritual community is inclusive of all people and honors differences in theological perspective, age, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, class, and ability.

The list is long on purpose, and the first item is the one churches most often forget. Theological perspective. A community that welcomes every race and orientation and then requires a single set of beliefs has built a subtler wall. At Sunshine Cathedral there are people who take the resurrection literally and people who take it as metaphor, people who pray to a personal God and people who would not use the word, people who are Christian while others are Jewish, Muslim, Agnostic, and "spiritual" beyond any doctrine…and they all take Communion from the same hands. Inclusion that stops at the doctrine is not inclusion.

Christians ought to strive for peace and justice among all people, knowing that living a life of compassion, empathy, fairness, and generosity is the best way to express our faith.

This is justice-love, stated as a tenet. Notice what the point says the best way to express faith is. Not worship. Not belief. Not evangelism. A life of compassion, empathy, fairness, and generosity. Jesus's own test in Matthew 25 is the same: the sheep are sorted from the goats by what they did for the least of these, and not one of them is asked what they believed.

Embracing the insights of contemporary science and striving to protect the Earth and ensure its integrity and sustainability.

Two commitments in one point, and they belong together. A church that reads Genesis 1 as a liturgical poem rather than a geology lesson has no quarrel with evolution, cosmology, or the age of the universe; it can rejoice in them, as Emerson did, as the world made visible. And a church that believes there is not a spot where God is not cannot treat the Earth as raw material. Every acre is the Presence. To poison a river is to poison something God is in, something God has shown up as.

Committing to a path of life-long learning, believing there is more value in questioning than in absolutes.

The last point is the one Sunshine Cathedral quotes most. It is not anti-conviction; we are full of convictions, and this book is a list of them. It is anti-closure. A question keeps you moving. An absolute lets you stop. Meister Eckhart prayed to be rid of God for exactly this reason: every fixed answer, held long enough, becomes an idol, and the only way to keep God bigger than your idea of God is to keep asking.

Sunshine Cathedral is firmly rooted in Progressive Christianity, while individuals in our community represent several branches of the Christian tradition and traditions beyond Christianity.

What "Progressive" Does and Does Not Mean

Progress. Forward movement. New learning. Considering new perspectives. Trying new things.

Progressive Christianity and progressive politics overlap, and I will not pretend otherwise. If you believe every person has sacred value, you will find yourself on one side of most questions about who gets to marry, who gets to vote, who gets health care, and who gets deported. But the theology comes first, and it is not a party platform. There are progressive Christians who are politically conservative on economics or on foreign policy, and there are people on the political left who find our talk of Christ and Communion and the Presence quaint or worse. Our commitments are to the least of these, wherever the least of these happen to be, and a party (or religious ideology) that abandons them will not keep us.

"Progressive" is not necessarily a synonym for "permissive." It comes from the conviction that the Spirit is still teaching and the church can still learn. It has content. It says the Christ Way is our way. It says sacred value is the premise. It says the test of a life is compassion. It says the Earth (and all that is in it and of it) is holy. These are not "anything goes." They are a demanding set of commitments; many churches do not keep them, and no church (ours included) keeps them perfectly. A person who wants a religion with no claims will not be comfortable here for long. We make claims. We just make them about love rather than law, relationship rather than rules, hope rather than hatefulness, and healing rather than (and often from) hatred.

Where We Go Beyond

Progressive Christianity gave us our permission and our first stream. It is not our whole river, and I want to say plainly where we go past it.

The movement, at its best, is honest, humane, and just. At its worst it can seem to have its own fundamentals, its own harsh judgments, its own intolerance for people who aren't in lock step with where we currently find ourselves.

I've seen people committed to allyship be shamed for not knowing the most up to date verbiage about a marginalized group or for using old language to convey contemporary concern and goodwill. Progressive is beautiful until it becomes as limiting or as stifling or as impatient or unwelcoming as more "right wing" thinking.

What Sunshine Cathedral adds is the second stream: the conviction that there is a Presence, that it is everywhere, that we are in it, from it, of it, one with it, and that prayer is not a ritual of solidarity but an actual practice with actual effects. That conviction came to us from New Thought, and the next chapter tells the story. Without it, progressive Christianity is a set of good positions. With it, the positions become what they were meant to be: the visible edge of an invisible love.

Progressive Christianity simply says that questions are more important than the answers we come up with, that everyone is loved by God, that other religions also have wisdom and holiness, that science is important and not at odds with spirituality, and that scripture can be understood in a variety of ways, and the best ways are those that promote justice, tolerance, goodwill, and peace. We say all of that, and then we say: there's not a spot where God is not. The second sentence is the one that turns a position into a faith.

Chapter 19: New Thought: An American Healing Movement

Why New Thought Spirituality Appeals to LGBTQ+ People

The New Thought movement, emerging in the nineteenth century as a spiritual healing movement, posits that reality is largely shaped (and certainly influenced) by one's attitudes and beliefs.

Rooted in the teachings of Phineas Quimby and Emma Curtis Hopkins, it emphasizes the power of optimism and the inherent divinity within each individual. New Thought avoids rigid dogma, instead focusing on practical application of its principles for personal betterment.

Central to New Thought is the concept of "mind power," suggesting that physical and emotional well-being, as well as material success, are influenced by habitual thoughts that sink into the subconscious mind which steers the ship of our lives. Proponents believe that

by aligning one's thoughts with universal spiritual or mental laws, individuals can attract many of their desired outcomes into their lives.

Some have accused New Thought of being overly focused on material prosperity, but a mature and equitable understanding of New Thought isn't about becoming wealthy or getting every wish granted but rather training one's thoughts and emotions to create mental atmospheres that can make life better wherever improvement is needed or desired. Like any technique, therapy, or business plan, New Thought spirituality helps one find ways to pursue goals without judging oneself or others for how they are achieved or how long it takes them to be reached.

Science of Mind author Ernest Holmes, Unity School of Christianity founders Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, and Divine Science founder Malinda Cramer and secondary pioneers (the Brooks sisters) all embraced this philosophy, as did Church of Truth founder Albert Grier, Home of Truth founder Annie Rix Militz, Agape International founder Michael Beckwith, and Universal Foundation for Better Living founder Johnnie Colemon.

Women were early leaders in New Thought, and as spiritual healing practitioners they found a career at a time when professional opportunities were not abundant for women.

The Clockmaker and the Teacher

The story deserves telling at more length, because many outside the movement do not know it, and it is one of the most American stories there is.

Phineas Parkhurst Quimby was a clockmaker in Belfast, Maine, with almost no formal education. In the 1830s he became fascinated by mesmerism, the hypnotic healing craze that was sweeping New England lecture halls, and for a while he toured with a clairvoyant subject who would diagnose illnesses in a trance. Over time Quimby noticed something the mesmerists had not: the cures did not depend on the trance, or on the remedies, or on anything the healer did. They depended on what the patient believed. A patient who was convinced she would get well, very often got well. Disease (dis-ease), Quimby concluded, was in large part a matter of mind, an error in belief, and the healer's real work was to change the belief.

He set up a practice in Portland and treated thousands. He kept notes, and the notes, later published, contain the whole of New Thought in seed: that God is Wisdom, not a person; that the Christ is a principle Jesus embodied rather than a title only he could hold; that sickness is the body's expression of a false idea; that truth, understood, heals.

Quimby died in 1866. One of the patients he had treated was a chronically ill woman named Mary Baker Glover, later Eddy, who would go on to found Christian Science and spend the rest of her life denying that she had learned anything from him.

The movement, though, ran through another of his heirs. Emma Curtis Hopkins had been one of Eddy's students and editors in Boston until the two women fell out, and in the 1880s she set up her own New Thought seminary in Chicago. She was called the teacher of teachers, and the title was earned. Nearly every founder of a New Thought denomination sat in her classroom: Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, who founded Silent Unity and the Unity School of Christianity; a Mrs. Bingham who taught Nona Brooks and her sisters (they followed Malinda Cramer as secondary pioneers of Divine Science); and, much later, Ernest Holmes, who studied with her in New York in the 1920s and went on to write The Science of Mind and found The Institute of Religious Science & Philosophy (which evolved into the Church of Religious Science). Holmes was ordained by Divine Science minister Agnes Galer.

Hopkins ordained women as ministers when almost no Christian body in the world would. Her *Christian Science Theological Seminary graduated its first class in 1889, twenty women and two men, and she called them all reverend.

The Brooks sisters of Colorado, Nona, Alethea, and Fannie, met Cramer's teaching and built Divine Science into a church in Denver in the 1890s. Fannie Brooks James wrote the Statement of Being that opens the next chapter and that Divine Science students still memorize. Nona Brooks was ordained (by Malinda Cramer) and pastored the Denver church for decades.

By the early twentieth century there were dozens of these bodies, and in 1914 they federated, loosely, into the International New Thought Alliance, which still exists and to which Sunshine Cathedral still belongs. Its principles are in the next chapter. They have been revised over the years, but the center has not moved: God is omnipresent, God is good, we are one with God, and thought has power.

The Women

I said above that women were early leaders in New Thought, and it is worth pausing on how unusual that was.

In 1889, when Hopkins ordained her first class, no mainline Protestant denomination in America ordained women. The Catholic and Orthodox churches did not and do not. The Methodists would not fully ordain women until 1956, the Presbyterians until 1956, the Episcopalians until 1976. New Thought was, for the better part of a century, the one branch of American religion in which a woman could found a church, lead it, write its theology, and train its ministers, and it was women who did most of the founding, leading, writing, and training.

Part of the reason is that New Thought began as a healing practice, and healing practitioners could set up an office and take patients without anyone's permission. It was

a career open to talent at a time when very few were. But part of the reason is theological. A religion that says God is not a person, and certainly not a man, has no reason to keep women from the pulpit. A religion that says the divine is in every individual cannot say it is more in some than others. New Thought's expansive language, its "Father-Mother God," its Divine Mind and Presence and Spirit, was not a late feminist correction. It was there at the start, and it was there because the people writing it were women who had no reason to believe in a male deity or in male superiority.

That is a lineage a queer church can recognize. The people who built our second stream were people the church tried to segregate and control, and they built something broader with room for all kinds of people.

**The term Christian Science was used by various metaphysicians before it became the proprietary name of Mary Baker Eddy's Church of Christ, Scientist (aka Christian Science). Likewise, Mrs. Eddy would sometimes use the phrase "Divine Science" before it became the name of a New Thought denomination.*

The Prosperity Question

New Thought has a reputation as a "health and wealth" philosophy, and that reputation is not entirely undeserved. It influenced *The Power of Positive Thinking* and *The Secret* which aren't bad but they can be shallowly understood and applied.

Some teachers suggest that the right thinking might bring a Cadillac. Rev. Ike, whose metaphysics I have cited, was not shy about money (though I believe he was trying to empower and encourage people often left out of systems that prosper a few at the expense of many others). And yet, people with 7 figure incomes can be miserable and people who work for set salaries, hourly wages, or who live on fixed pensions can be happy, fulfilled, and have most every need met. Prosperity is something worth wishing and working for but not every one has the same idea of prosperity. Like most things, prosperity is not a one size fits all experience.

Any teaching that says thought shapes experience can be turned into a teaching that says the poor are poor because they think poorly, and that is a lie, and it is a cruel one. Poverty is made by systems, not by bad thoughts (certainly not from unhealthy thinking alone).

Let's remember what the New Thought pioneers were doing. Quimby was healing the sick. Hopkins was training women to be ministers. The Fillmores ran a prayer ministry, Silent Unity, that answered letters from people in trouble, for free, around the clock (and still does). Cramer and the Brooks sisters were teaching that God is the only Presence and that every person is its expression. None of them was selling a Cadillac. They were teaching people who had been told they were sick, weak, sinful, and powerless that they were none

of those things, and that the Presence was in them and always available. That is not “the prosperity gospel.” It is the doctrine of sacred value, in a nineteenth-century idiom.

“Prosperity” is not the wrong word if it is the right prosperity. The world of the generous gets larger and larger, Proverbs says. (11.24)

A person who believes they are one with the Source of all good will live more generously, more confidently, and more freely than a person who believes they are a mistake, and that shows up in their life, sometimes in their bank account and more often in things a bank account cannot hold. We do not promise wealth in exchange for generosity, and we do not threaten consequences for its absence. We do say that a mind aligned with omnipresent Love will find life opening in ways a mind aligned with fear will not. That is not a get-rich-quick scheme. It is Jesus saying that he came that we might have life abundantly. (John 10)

Why New Thought Found Us

New Thought theology affirms Spirit or Mind or Energy as being the source and substance of all reality, sees sin as error in judgment, and sees atonement not as bridging a gap between humanity and God but as understanding that there can be no gap between humanity and God/Spirit/divine Mind (at-one-ment). New Thought teachers who study the Bible tend to interpret it allegorically and symbolically. Most in New Thought agree that life is endless but there are many ideas about what that might look like beyond this human experience.

New Thought’s affirming, loving, non-condemning, optimistic, and non-dogmatic teachings have become popular with many LGBTQ+ people. New Thought doesn’t condemn LGBTQ+ people, or divorce, or consensual, caring sexual expression, or much of anything that supports one’s happiness and well-being that doesn’t harm others.

There is a chapter of that history that belongs in this book. In the early 1980s, when AIDS was killing gay men in Los Angeles and almost no church would touch them, a New Thought teacher named Louise Hay began holding meetings in her living room. A few men came, then dozens, then hundreds, and the gatherings, which everyone called the Hayride, moved to an auditorium.

Hay did not cure AIDS, nor did she promise to do so. She helped people love themselves and many find that in loving themselves they experienced layers of healing which might include physical improvement and even when it didn’t, life still seemed better, less fearful, more meaningful and manageable. My own husband, Bishop Robert Griffin, was a member of the West Coast 1980s Hayride and he believes it helped him face difficulties with peace and optimism, which in turn helped him survive.

Hay did something the mainline churches would not. She told men who were dying, whom their families had abandoned and their pastors had condemned, that they were loved, that they were not being punished, that they were worthy, and she said it every week until they died, and then she said it to the next ones. Some didn't die. Many died less afraid than they otherwise might have been. Thousands of gay men heard the doctrine of sacred value first from Louise Hay, because she was one of too few saying it.

That is why New Thought found us, and why we found it. It was the one American spirituality that had never told us we were mistakes. When Troy Perry's MCC gave us a church and the progressive Christians gave us a Bible we could read, New Thought gave us a God we could pray to without flinching. The three streams met, at Sunshine Cathedral, in the lives of people who needed all three.

New Thought philosophy influenced the Twelve Step Movement, Norman Vincent Peale's *Power of Positive Thinking*, and various self-help authors and groups. It shares many ideas in common with *A Course in Miracles*, *The Secret*, the writings of Louise Hay, and the metaphysics of Rev. Ike. Its enduring appeal lies in its optimistic message of human potential.

Sunshine Cathedral embraces New Thought philosophy and offers a ministerial training program in the New Thought tradition known as Divine Science. Our senior minister is a life member of the International New Thought Alliance (INTA) and for many years has been a leader within the Divine Science Federation. There are several Divine Science ministers and practitioners in leadership at Sunshine Cathedral.

Chapter 20: God as the Thing Itself

Ernest Holmes, when he needed a name for the Divine that did not carry the baggage of the old names, called it the Thing Itself. Not a being. Not a person with a personality. The Thing Itself: the reality behind all realities, the Presence in which everything is present, the one Substance of which everything is made.

It was not a new idea. This chapter is about how old it is.

A Lineage

Thinkers before or contemporary with New Thought whose concepts of God are compatible with, similar to, and sometimes the very same as New Thought metaphysics:

Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (1260–1339) believed that the core of the human soul and the core of God are the same. He thought any image or name for God made God something finite and manageable, which could never be the real God. He said, "The eye

with which I see God is the eye through which God sees me." He prayed for God to rid him of God, that is, of preconceived human dogmas about God. The Divine for Eckhart was the dark, modeless nothingness back of all that is.

Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), an Italian poet and philosopher, taught that God is everywhere immanent throughout the universe. He wrote, "God is the Principle of unity in all activity and is the Principle of Oneness." Referring to divine Mind, he held that Mind and matter are one. The church burned him for it in the Campo de' Fiori in Rome, and a statue of him stands there now, facing the Vatican.

Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) was a Portuguese/Dutch student of the Jewish Talmud and the Torah, as well as of Kabbalah. Spinoza believed God to be the very Substance of the Universe. He also challenged people to think in abstract ways, saying, "God is not only the process of thinking, God is also the thought itself." When asked if he believed in God, Einstein answered, "Yes. I believe in the God of Spinoza."

George Berkeley (1685–1753), an Irish philosopher and Anglican bishop, believed that God is spiritual substance, and everything that is must be made of the same spiritual substance. He wrote, "What [humans] thought to be substance is actually an idea in the mind of God."

Georg Hegel (1770–1831) was a German philosopher who described God as a system of relationships.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), who trained at Harvard to be a Unitarian minister, believed God was energy or spirit, that the material world was God made manifest, that there was a unifying spiritual force (Over-Soul), and that God somehow dwells in every person. "...the currents of the universal Being circular through me; I am a part and parcel of God." (RWE)

Mordecai Kaplan (1881–1983) was a Lithuanian-born American rabbi who affirmed that God is not personal, and that all anthropomorphic descriptions of God are, at best, imperfect metaphors. He saw God as a natural, cosmic power that nudges humans toward truth, justice, and fulfillment. He was a signer of the Humanist Manifesto.

Paul Tillich (1886–1965) was a Protestant theologian who blended contemporary biblical scholarship, existential philosophy, ontology (study of being), and psychological insights to articulate a profound understanding of God. He denied the existence of the God in whom he deeply believed; that is, he denied God was a being (even a supreme one) but instead was the ground of being. God does not exist; rather, God IS existence. God is the power to be.

Rabbi Morris Lichtenstein (1889–1938) and his wife Tehilla co-founded the Society for Jewish Science. Jewish Science sees God as a "force" or "energy." Liechtenstein sometimes called God "the divine Mind."

Masaharu Taniguchi (1893–1985) taught that God was the infinite, universal, and absolute supreme spirit that permeates the entire cosmos, and that God and what comes from God constitute the sole reality. Taniguchi's teachings are syncretic (Christian, Buddhist, and New Thought).

Quentin Crisp (1908–1999), a model, writer, and performer, once said on stage, "If God is the unifying factor, if God is the cell within the cell, the universe that encompasses the universe, then I would accept prayer and I would accept the idea of God. Don't forget, almost all religions move toward the unifying factor, the God behind God, the God of Gods."

Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022) didn't revere a remote deity with a personality as "God" but thought that everything, reality, sacred wonders, moments of mindfulness were all "God." God, for Hanh, was living the reality you can touch when you get still and breathe mindfully.

And *A Course in Miracles* (1976) "scribed" by Ivy League psychologist Helen Schucman teaches that God is pure, infinite Love, an absolute non-dual reality.

What the Lineage Shows

Look at that list again and notice who is on it.

A Dominican friar tried for heresy. A Renaissance philosopher burned at the stake. A Jewish philosopher excommunicated from his Jewish faith community who had to then become a lens grinder to make a living. An Anglican bishop. A German idealist. A Unitarian who left the ministry. A Reconstructionist rabbi. A Lutheran refugee from the Nazis. A Jewish healer. A Japanese syncretist. An English gay non-binary bon vivant who spent his life being conspicuous in a world that wanted him hidden. A Vietnamese Buddhist monk exiled for opposing a war. And a channeled text that claims to be the voice of Jesus.

They do not share a religion. Several of them were thrown out of the religions they had. They do not share a century, a language, or a continent. Most of them never read each other. And they arrived, by twelve different roads, at one place: God is not a being among beings, not a person with moods, not a potentate on a throne somewhere else. God is the ground, the substance, the unity, the Thing Itself, in which everything that is has its being.

New Thought did not invent that idea. What New Thought did was to notice it, gather it, and hand it to people who had never been to a seminary and needed it to work on a

Tuesday. That is the movement's real contribution: not a new metaphysics but a democratized one. Eckhart's insight, which had lived in Latin sermons for six centuries, became something a clockmaker's patient in Maine could use to get out of bed.

What We Affirm

New Thought affirmations declaring the truth of being and unity (condensed from the Principles of INTA):

We affirm God as Infinite Being, Spirit, Ultimate Reality, universal and everlasting.

We affirm the unity of God and humanity.

We affirm the utility of positive prayer.

We affirm the sacred value of all persons and truth that is found in multiple faith traditions.

We affirm that our attitudes and habitual thoughts influence our experience of daily living.

We affirm love as the highest truth, highest value, and holiest experience.

The primary beliefs of New Thought could be summarized as:

- Infinite Intelligence, aka "God," is omnipresent and is the source and substance of all life and contains within It infinite possibilities.
- God is "spirit," and spirit is the "stuff" from which the universe and everything in it is made.
- True human selfhood is divine and is in some way eternal.
- Positive thinking is a force for good.
- Prayer isn't about beseeching a distant deity for favors but is more about cooperating with universal, spiritual laws that can bring about positive change.

A word on each, because they compress a great deal.

Omnipresent, source and substance. This is chapter 4 in one line. God is not somewhere; God is the where. And God is not only the maker of things but what they are made of. As one Christian mystic said in the Middle Ages, we are not only made by God, we are also made of God (Miss Julian of Norwich, 14th century).

Spirit is the stuff. Materialism says everything is matter and mind is an accident of it. New Thought says the reverse: everything is spirit, or mind, or energy, and matter is the form it takes when it slows down enough to be seen. Physics, a century after Quimby, would say something similar.

True selfhood is divine. Not the ego, not the personality, not the résumé. The self underneath, the one Eckhart said shares a ground with God, the one Genesis says is made

in God's image. That self was never broken and cannot be lost. The work of the spiritual life is not to fix it but to find it.

Positive thinking is a force for good. The most misunderstood of the five. It does not say thinking positively guarantees positive outcomes. It says the direction of your habitual thought is a force, one among many, that shapes the life you can live. Fear is also a force. The five points do not deny that. They ask which force you will feed. The point of choosing optimistic and joyful thoughts and imagining vitality and achievement is that when these ideas and images are repeated often enough, heard frequently enough, or held with strong emotion, they sink into the deeper mind (subconscious) where they fuel the psychic engine of one's life. Some believe that the subconscious mind is part of the divine mind but whether it is or isn't, the subconscious mind is powerful and intentional, and consistent thoughts and feelings (optimistic or pessimistic, joyful or desperate, confident or anxious) direct the subconscious mind which then shows you in your life what is going on deep within.

Prayer is cooperation, not petition. Chapter 21 is about this. The short version: if God is the Thing Itself and you are part of it, you do not ask it for favors. You align yourself with it, the way a sailor aligns with the wind.

The Statement of Being

Divine Science has been part of the New Thought Movement since the 1880s.

Divine Science Statement of Being (Fannie James):

God is all, both invisible and visible.
One Presence, One Mind, One Power is All.
This One that is all is perfect life, perfect love, and perfect substance.
[I am] the individual expression of God and [am] ever one with this perfect life, perfect love, and perfect substance.

When God Is a Presence and Not a Person

I want to close this chapter by facing the question people ask when they first meet this theology: what have I lost? The honest answer is: a great deal, and it was mostly weight.

You have lost a God who watches (in order to "catch" you in some naughty thought or deed). The surveillance God, the one who sees you in the shower and keeps a ledger, the one whose attention was always a little threatening. The Presence does not watch you. It is in you, as you, closer than watching. Watching requires distance, and there is none.

You have lost a God who gets angry. The moody deity of the old stories, who smites and repents of smiting and smites again. The Thing Itself does not have moods, because it does

not have a self that could be in a mood. It is Love, all the way through, the way water is wet all the way through. There is nothing in it to get angry.

You have lost a God who chooses. The God who picks nations, picks winners, picks the saved, the elect, the blessed. The Presence is not more present in Jerusalem than in Fort Lauderdale, or more present in the believer than in the atheist. It does not choose, because choosing means excluding, and there is no outside so exclusion isn't possible.

And you have lost a God who can be talked into things. Which sounds like a loss until you notice what it means: that you no longer have to beg and bargain for divine aid. You do not have to find the right words, or the right posture, or the right intermediary. You do not have to be good enough first. The Presence was never withholding anything. The only thing that was ever in the way was the belief that something could be in the way.

What you have instead is not a person but a power, a presence, principle, a no-thing that is how everything is. It is Love, Life, Wisdom, Power, and Presence that every person you have ever loved was made of, undiluted, everywhere, now. Fannie James's last sentence in the Statement of Being is the one to hold: "I am the individual expression of God, and ever one with this perfect life, perfect love, and perfect substance."

Ever one. Not sometimes. Not after you get it right. Ever. That is the Thing Itself. The next chapter is about what happens when you plug into it.

Chapter 21: Prayer That Works

What "Works" Means

The title of this chapter is a claim, and I should say what it claims before we go further.

When people hear that a church teaches prayer that works, they assume a promise: pray correctly and get what you asked for. That is not the promise, and a church that made it would be dishonest or naive. People pray for healing and die (though that doesn't deny that healing may have happened). They pray for jobs they don't get. They pray for a parent to choose their queer kid over their toxic theology, and painfully often the parent does not. Prayer that "works" in the sense of a vending machine does not exist. We all get lucky sometimes and there are attitudes and actions that can tip the scales, but the genie granting every wish is fantasy, not faith.

Prayer works the way medicine works, or exercise, or a long conversation with a wise friend: it changes the one who practices it, reliably, in ways that can be felt and observed, and the change alters what becomes possible. A person who has spent twenty minutes in the Presence approaches the hospital, the interview, the difficult phone call as a different person than the one who did not. Fear has less grip. Perception has widened.

Options that were invisible become visible. And because perception shapes experience (some argue that practically, perception is reality), the outcome is often different too, not by magic but by the ordinary mechanism of a calmer, clearer, more loving person meeting the same situation.

That is the claim. Prayer changes the pray-er, and the changed pray-er changes what happens next. It is a modest claim next to the vending machine. It is also one I have watched hold true throughout my decades-long spiritual journey.

Prayer in New Thought

Prayer is simply communion with one's Higher Power, an awareness of our unity with the Infinite Source. We can achieve this with visualization, with positive affirmations, with being fully present in extended times of silence, or we can follow verbal formulas. As long as the prayer method makes us aware of the divine presence with and within us, we are probably doing it well enough. And, as we remember that we are forever part of God, in God's presence, never separated from the Life and Love that God is, fears tend to dissipate, peace and joy increase, and the quality of life in general is likely to improve greatly.

Asking and Affirming

Most of us learned to pray by asking. Dear God, please. It is the prayer of a child, and there is nothing wrong with it; Jesus himself taught a prayer that asks for bread and forgiveness…or that's how it seems in English. In Aramaic (the language he would have used), the statements are more present tense affirmations. Nevertheless, asking, demanding, imagining, hoping, wishing…there's no getting it wrong. There's just good, better, and best. A priest once told me, "To try to pray is to pray."

But the asking prayer carries an assumption that a theology of omnipresence has to examine: that God is somewhere else, has not yet acted, and might be persuaded or might be resistant to lending aid.

Affirmative prayer begins from the other end. It does not say "God, please be with me." It says "God is with me." It does not say "please heal her." It says "she is held in perfect life." It is not informing God of anything, since God is already present at the situation, closer to it than the one praying. It is informing the one praying, bringing the mind into agreement with what the theology says is already true. The change of grammar is the whole method. You move from petition to declaration, from "may it be so" to "it is so," and something in you shifts to meet the declaration.

People sometimes object that this is just talking yourself into things. It kind of is. That is what prayer has always been, in every tradition: a practice for talking yourself into the

truth, over and against the lies that fear tells. The psalmist did it. “Why are you cast down, O my soul? Hope in God.” That is not a report. It is an affirmation, addressed by the psalmist to himself, in the middle of despair. New Thought did not invent affirmative prayer. It noticed that the psalms were full of it and built a practice on the noticing.

Affirmations from the Psalter: God is my shepherd. Joy comes in the morning. How good and pleasant it is when people dwell together as one! We will triumph with the help of God. God hears my cry. God is our refuge and our strength.

A New Thought Sample Prayer Treatment

There is but one power, one substance, one presence in all the universe, and I am one with all that is. I am a manifestation of perfect Life. I am filled with light and peace, joy and vitality, hope and confidence. What is true of me is true of all people, and what I wish for myself I wish for all people. There is that of God in each of us; we are never alone. And so it is that I now trust that my every need is being met, my good desires that harm none are being fulfilled, my blessing of love reaches many and lifts them up, and I expect and accept miracles into my life, changes in perception from fear to love, today and every day. When I change how I see things, I also change how I experience them. In gratitude and faith, I release these words to the activity of the Law of Mind. Amen.

The prayer (or spiritual treatment, as we are treating our fear thoughts about the conditions of life with the medicine of prayer) will usually contain an awareness of “The Thing Itself,” God/Goddess/Spirit/Divine Mind, etc., and the belief that we are part of “The Thing Itself” (a term coined by Ernest Holmes for the Divine). Then there are affirmations, a sense of gratitude, and a release of the treatment to allow it to do the work you’ve sent it to do (let go and let God).

By the Numbers

1. Acknowledge there is a power and it is available to us.
2. Know that we are one with it.
3. Declare the blessings that are desired (for yourself or for others) as if they were already present or definitely on their way.
4. Be thankful for the good you trust the treatment is bringing about.
5. Release.

Silent Prayer

Sit for a while in the Silence (feeling "the Presence"). Hold yourself (or the one on your heart) in divine light; bless yourself, or the person for whom you are praying, or the situation on your mind, with love. Make silent affirmations or simply imagine the situation being bathed in light, people emerging from the situation smiling and content, peace filling every heart, and know that blessings are at hand, and then feel a strong sense of gratitude for it.

Though silent, the pattern is the same: Recognition, Unification, Affirmation, Gratitude, and Release.

In New Thought, God (Reality) is the "stuff" from which all things are made. The stuff, the process, the outcome: all God. There is one Substance; that substance is energy or spirit, and we are all part of it. As one Christian mystic said in the Middle Ages, "We are not only made by God, we are also made of God." (Julian of Norwich)

Denials

Denials are useful to some people ("I deny that fear has any power over me," "I deny that the situation at hand is insurmountable," "I deny the validity of old beliefs of inadequacy"), and when they are used, they need to be immediately followed by an affirmation. The denial attempts to dismantle the false belief, and then we want to be intentional about what replaces it; we do that with positive affirmations.

Forgiveness

Sometimes holding on to resentments or regrets can block our prayers. We deal with these with the simple act of forgiveness. "I forgive myself for…" "I forgive you/them for…" "I am willing to forgive xyz" or "I am willing to be willing to forgive xyz." We can simply say, "I release the past to the past and choose to live in the blessed, love-filled now. The power of love can heal every emotional wound. Where forgiveness is needed for healing to flourish, let it now be offered and received."

Forgiveness might go before the affirmations (or before the denials and affirmations). But for most prayer work, the five steps usually will suffice.

Praying for Others

Everything above can be turned outward, and at Sunshine Cathedral most of it is.

The Silent Helpers are our prayer ministry: practitioners and chaplains who receive requests, by card, by phone, by email, from members and from strangers, and who pray

for each one. There is never a charge. The tradition goes back to Silent Unity, the Fillmores' prayer ministry in Kansas City, which has been answering requests around the clock since the 1890s, and behind that to every church that ever kept a prayer list.

What the Silent Helpers do is treatment for someone else. They do not beg God to notice a person God is already in. They hold the person in the Presence, affirm that the person is one with perfect life and perfect love, see them whole, give thanks, and release. The person prayed for may never know. It does not matter. The practitioner's work is to see the truth about someone who cannot, at the moment, see it for themselves, and to keep seeing it until they can.

I want to say something about what this does and does not do. It does not override anyone's freedom or fate. It does not guarantee outcomes. What it does is real nevertheless: it surrounds a struggling person with a community's settled conviction that they are held, and people can feel that, and it changes how they carry what they are carrying. I often say praying for others is an energy hug. Moreover, consciousness is nonlocal, so praying for someone really is, at the energetic level, touching them and touch can be very healing indeed. Hold the hand. Kiss the boo boo. Touch a heart with a smile. Touch a soul (mind) with a prayer.

I have had members tell me that they got through a diagnosis or a breakup or a period of grief or depression on the strength of knowing that somewhere, someone from the church was praying for them. They were right to feel it. They were being seen whole by people who had practiced noticing and knowing.

Before I share prayers for particular occasions let me offer one more…still five steps but this one includes denial.

I call this one **Bishop Durrell's O Double D Double A prayer.**

O is for omnipresence.

Double D is denial and declaration (or decision).

Double A is acceptance and appreciation (gratitude).

Here is an example of the O-D-D-A-A prayer:

God is the substance of reality and that includes my lie; I therefore deny that there is anything that can rob my hope or joy, and I decide that I am worthy and ready for abundant blessings to express in my life. I accept this truth right now. And so it is that I am grateful for all blessings. I am certain of divine goodness active in my life. I appreciate the power of prayer and the healing that comes from it. Amen.

Prayers for Particular Occasions

Affirmative prayer is best when it is your own. But people ask for words, and a text about prayer should give some. These follow the five-step pattern. Change the pronouns, the names, the details; keep the shape.

When you are afraid. *There is one Presence, and it is here, in this room, in this breath, in me. I am not outside it and cannot fall out of it. Fear is a visitor; it cannot stay. I let the fear pass. I am held. I am safe in the only way that finally matters. I give thanks for the ground under me that does not move. And I release this. It is done.*

For someone experiencing illness. *God is all, and God is perfect life, and [N.] is in God now. Nothing in [N.] is outside the Presence: not the body, not the diagnosis, not the fear. I see [N.] whole. I see peace in the room where [N.] is. I see the hands that care for [N.] guided and steady. Whatever the path ahead, [N.] is accompanied, and love is the companion. I give thanks for the life that cannot be lost. I release [N.] to the Presence, which never will let go.*

In grief. *The one I love was made of God and has not left God. There is no place outside the Presence, and so there is no place where they are lost. I do not know what they know now. I know they are held in the same Love that holds me, and that the Love is one, and so we are not apart. I let myself grieve; grief is an expression of love and it is a healing process. I give thanks for every day I had with [N.]. I release them, and I keep them, and both are true.*

Coming out. *I am God's miracle and not God's mistake. I was made very good, and what I am about to say is true, and the truth is God's. I walk toward myself. Whoever hears me is also in the Presence, and I trust the Presence in them to meet the Presence in me. Whatever they say, I remain what I am, which is beloved. I give thanks for the courage that is already mine. I release the outcome. I keep the truth.*

Before a decision. *One Mind is All, and I am in it, and it is in me. The wisdom I need is not somewhere else; it is here and I am made from it. I lay down anxiety about choosing what might be wrong. I open to what is already clear. I trust that the right path will be recognizable, or that I will learn from whichever I take. I give thanks for guidance, which is not a voice from outside but a clearing from within. I release the question to the Presence, and I listen.*

For the world. *There is not a spot where God is not: not the border, not the prison, not the war, not the hospital, not the street. I hold all of it in the Light. I see the hungry fed and the stranger welcomed and the prisoner visited, and I see myself among the hands that do it. "What God does for us She must do through us." I refuse the lie that love is*

losing. I give thanks for every act of justice-love being done right now, unseen, by people I may never meet. I release the world to the Love that is making it, and I get up to help.
In gratitude, for no particular reason. *Thank you. For the breath. For the light through the window. For the one Presence in which all of this is happening and in which I am happening too. I ask for nothing. I need nothing. I am in God now, and that is enough, and it was always enough. Amen.*

The Theology and Practice of Prayer

Since God is a presence rather than a person, prayer isn't begging a divine person for favors, but rather is remembering that we are part of the one All, and by cooperating with the metaphysical principles, demonstrating that we are spiritual beings in a spiritual universe governed by spiritual principles. We, in a present-tense declarative manner (silently or aloud), impress the image of good into our thinking and trust that we are in the flow of divine energy. We can be certain that things will work out as hoped, or in a better way, or we will learn something profound, and can experience peace no matter what. That's the theology and practice of prayer in New Thought as practiced and taught at Sunshine Cathedral.

Chapter 22: Spiritual Humanism

Why a Church Would Use the Word

Of the three streams, this is the one that may surprise people most. Progressive Christianity they expect from a church like ours. New Thought they may not have heard of, but it sounds religious enough. Humanism sounds like the opposite of religion. It is the word for people who do not believe in God, or so the culture has taught us, and a church that claims it seems to be claiming its own contradiction.

Here is why we claim it anyway.

Humanism, at its root, is the conviction that human beings are responsible for human affairs: that the problems of this world are ours to solve, that reason and evidence are how we find out what is true, and that the measure of any idea, including any religious idea, is what it does for actual people. Put that way, it is hard to see what a follower of Jesus could object to. Jesus did not tell people to wait for heaven to fix things. He told them the kin-dom was at hand and sent them out to heal and feed. The Good Samaritan did not pray for the man in the ditch (unless sharing compassion is prayer, and I believe it is). He bandaged

him and made arrangements for his safe lodging where he could recover. That is humanism in a parable.

And the “spiritual” in spiritual humanism is not a hedge. It is the recognition that human beings have always reached for something beyond the measurable, that awe and ritual and community and the big questions are part of what we are, and that a humanism which throws all of that out is not more honest but possibly less complete. A spiritual humanist keeps the candles and the singing and the silence, and keeps them honestly, without pretending to know what she does not know. And even those who don’t say “God” and who doubt that mystery is much more than the ignorance of an age, still need connection, hope, kindness, ways to celebrate the good, to grieve the sad, and to share. In my mind, that is all spiritual, that is all prayer, even worship. It is reaching out beyond any circumstance to affirm the worthiness of people to heal, thrive, and become better versions of themselves. I like my spirituality with stained glass windows and clergy drag, but anytime love is expressed, hope is embraced, and kindness is shared…Spirit (by any definition) is moving and blessings abound.

So the word fits. We are a community that takes human responsibility seriously, tests its beliefs against their fruits, welcomes science as a partner, and still lights candles. That is the third stream, and it is what keeps the other two from floating away.

The Ten Commitments of the American Humanist Association

1. **Altruism.** “I will help others in need without hoping for rewards.”
2. **Critical Thinking.** “I will practice good judgment by asking questions and thinking for myself.”
3. **Empathy.** “I will consider other people’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences.”
4. **Environmentalism.** “I will take care of the Earth and the life on it.”
5. **Ethical Development.** “I will always focus on becoming a better person.”
6. **Global Awareness.** “I will be a good neighbor to the people who share the Earth with me and help make the world a better place for everyone.”
7. **Humility.** “I will be aware of my strengths and weaknesses and appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of others.”
8. **Peace and Social Justice.** “I will help people solve problems and handle disagreements in ways that are fair for everyone.”
9. **Responsibility.** “I will be a good person, even when no one is looking, and own the consequences of my actions.”

10. **Service and Participation.** “I will help my community in ways that let me get to know the people I’m helping.”

These Humanist values are innately spiritual, expressions of the spirit of life and unity and love, and they are meant to help us become better versions of ourselves. Religion is meant to do this, as is literature, the arts, science, and philosophy, and these Humanist commitments are in complete harmony with the best of all these human efforts to improve humanity.

In Their Own Words

Below are the words of Spiritual Humanists:

“Religious humanists, secular humanists, and atheists can all agree that this life in this world is our central defining focus. Each one of us is responsible for human affairs, other beings, and the resources of our shared planet. We value freedom, reason, and tolerance, and it is our responsibility to develop this heritage for ensuing generations.” (AmericanHumanistCenterforEducation.org)

“Humanism is an approach to life that emphasizes human freedom, power, knowledge and responsibility to define and live a meaningful life. Inspiration, ethics, and living a good life are lessons learned from the human experience.” (IISHJ.org, International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism)

“What is Spiritual Humanism? A religion based on the ability of human beings to solve the problems of society using logic and science. Most people need a religion to help guide them through life’s challenges and difficult moral decisions. Recognizing how the power of religious rituals, methods, and communication can impact human behavior, Spiritual Humanism fuses traditional religious behaviors onto the foundation of scientific humanist inquiry.

“While it is impossible to remove age-old traditions from human culture, we can redirect them by redefining their underlying significance and meanings. Spiritual Humanism is natural, not supernatural. By using a method of scientific inquiry, we can define the inspirational, singular spark inherent in all living creatures.” (SpiritualHumanism.org)

According to the Church of Spiritual Humanism, the core tenets of spiritual humanism are:

1. **Reason and Science** (finding moral understanding in logic, scientific inquiry, and empirical evidence rather than dogma).
2. **Natural Reverence** (cultivating feelings of awe and connectedness toward nature, humanity, and the cosmos).

3. **Adaptable Rituals** (retaining some traditional rites of passage and ceremonies while redefining their meaning to be more “this-worldly” than “other-worldly”).
4. **Human-Centered Ethics** (compassion, equality, and trying to reduce human suffering based on mutual human responsibility).

Jesus’s command to love one’s neighbor, his parable of the Good Samaritan showing what it is to be a good neighbor, and the Golden Rule in his Sermon on the Mount are these very values and commitments.

The Humanist Manifesto

The original Humanist Manifesto allowed for religious humanism. The AHA now promotes the Humanist Manifesto III (there was also the Humanist Manifesto II).

The manifesto was designed to acknowledge the significant changes in religious beliefs throughout the modern world. Contemporary cosmologies, scientific inquiries and discoveries, as well as technology and global communication meant, to the thirty or so signers of the original Manifesto, that while there are benefits to religion it must modernize and become more humanistic in order to remain relevant and helpful to the human family.

“Such a vital, fearless, and frank religion capable of furnishing adequate social goals and personal satisfactions may appear to many people as a complete break with the past. While this age does owe a vast debt to the traditional religions, it is nonetheless obvious that any religion that can hope to be a synthesizing and dynamic force for today must be shaped for the needs of this age.” (original Humanist Manifesto)

Those first signers shared fifteen affirmations:

FIRST: Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created.

SECOND: Humanism believes that man [sic] is a part of nature and has emerged as a result of a continuous process.

THIRD: Holding an organic view of life, humanists find that the traditional dualism of mind and body must be rejected.

FOURTH: Humanism recognizes that [human] religious culture and civilization, as clearly depicted by anthropology and history, are the product of a gradual development due to interaction with the natural environment and social heritage. The individual born into a particular culture is largely molded by that culture.

FIFTH: Humanism asserts that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values. Obviously humanism does not deny the possibility of realities as yet undiscovered,

but it does insist that the way to determine the existence and value of any and all realities is by means of intelligent inquiry and by the assessment of their relations to human needs. Religion must formulate its hopes and plans in the light of the scientific spirit and method.

SIXTH: We are convinced that the time has passed for [beliefs in a personal or anthropomorphic God].

SEVENTH: Religion consists of those actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant. Nothing human is alien to the religious. The distinction between the sacred and the secular can no longer be maintained.

EIGHTH: Religious Humanism seeks [human] development and fulfillment in the here and now. This is the explanation of the humanist's social passion.

NINTH: The humanist finds [one's] religious emotions expressed in a heightened sense of personal life and in a cooperative effort to promote social well-being.

TENTH: It follows that there will be no uniquely religious emotions and attitudes of the kind hitherto associated with belief in the supernatural.

ELEVENTH: [We] will learn to face the crises of life in terms of [our] knowledge of [our] naturalness and probability. Reasonable attitudes will be fostered by education and supported by custom. We assume that humanism will take the path of social and mental hygiene and discourage sentimental and unreal hopes and wishful thinking.

TWELFTH: Believing that religion must work increasingly for joy in living, religious humanists aim to foster the creative in [human beings] and to encourage achievements that add to the satisfactions of life.

THIRTEENTH: Religious humanism maintains that all associations and institutions exist for the fulfillment of human life. The intelligent evaluation, transformation, control, and direction of such associations and institutions with a view to the enhancement of human life is the purpose and program of humanism. Certainly religious institutions must be reconstituted as rapidly as experience allows, in order to function effectively in the modern world.

FOURTEENTH: The humanists are firmly convinced that existing acquisitive and profit-motivated society has shown itself to be inadequate and that a radical change in methods, controls, and motives must be instituted. A socialized and cooperative economic order must be established to the end that the equitable distribution of the means of life be possible. Humanists demand a shared life in a shared world.

FIFTEENTH AND LAST: We assert that humanism will: (a) affirm life rather than deny it; (b) seek to elicit the possibilities of life, not flee from them; and (c) endeavor to

> establish the conditions of a satisfactory life for all, not merely for the few. By this positive morale and intention humanism will be guided, and from this perspective and alignment the techniques and efforts of humanism will flow.

[We are] at last becoming aware that we alone are responsible for the realization of the world of our dreams, that we have within us the power for its achievement. We must set intelligence and will to the task.

(AmericanHumanist.org)

The Company We Keep

Examples of spiritual humanists, who might also have been Christian or Jewish or Muslim, include the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Roman philosopher Marcus Aurelius, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism Mordecai Kaplan, and the founder of Humanistic Judaism, Sherwin T. Wine. A word on each, because the list is meant to show how wide the tent is.

Marcus Aurelius was emperor of Rome and, in the notebooks he kept, a Stoic philosopher who spent his nights reminding himself that he was mortal, that anger was useless, that the good of the whole was the only good worth pursuing, and that every person he met was his kin by virtue of sharing reason. He was not a Christian; his reign saw Christians persecuted. And yet his Meditations read, in places, like Ordinary Time: the practice of the presence of the whole, in the middle of the work.

Mordecai Kaplan, whom chapter 20 listed among the thinkers of the Thing Itself, said that God is the power that makes for salvation, by which he meant the sum of all the forces in the universe that push toward truth, justice, and fulfillment. He signed the first Humanist Manifesto and founded a branch of Judaism. He saw no contradiction, and neither do we.

Sherwin Wine was a rabbi in Michigan who, in the 1960s, stopped saying prayers he did not believe and founded Humanistic Judaism, a movement that keeps the calendar, the culture, the community, and the ethics of Judaism without requiring belief in a personal God. It is, in its way, what Sunshine Cathedral does with Christianity, and it exists for the same reason: people wanted the tradition and could not honestly hold the doctrine.

Dr. King is the one who matters most to us. He was a Baptist preacher who believed in God and prayed, and he was also a student of Gandhi and Thoreau and Tillich, he was drawn to Unitarianism, and he built the most consequential religious movement in American history on the conviction that the beloved community was to be realized here, by human beings, through human action, now. He did not wait for heaven to end

segregation. He called that waiting a sin. If that is not spiritual humanism, the phrase means nothing.

The Same Communion Table

Spiritual Humanism finds value and meaning in the natural world and in human potential while allowing for the best parts of religion (community, altruism, shared ritual, encouragement, a safe environment to explore the big questions common to human existence) to be retained if re-imagined or reinterpreted to be less “magical” and more practical.

Even theists, pantheists, panentheists, and deists can embrace and share the values and message of Spiritual Humanism.

Let me say what that looks like on a Sunday, because it is the thing newcomers find most compelling (or most intriguing anyway).

Two people come forward for the Eucharist. One of them believes in a personal God who hears her prayers, who was in Jesus in a unique way, and who will receive her when she dies. The other does not believe in God at all. He came because his husband sings in the choir, and he stayed because the community was the first one that had ever made him feel welcome without asking him to pretend. They receive the same bread from the same hands and hear the same blessing.

Fear-based religion says one of them is lying, or one of them is lost. Spiritual humanism says something different: that what they share is more important than what they don’t. They share the commitment to feed the hungry. They share the conviction that every person has sacred value. They share the awe, the singing, the silence, the candles, the community. They share the belief that this life, in this world, is the place where the good gets done. The theist calls the ground of all that God. The humanist calls it human potential, or love, or does not call it anything. The ground does not change depending on what it is called. Or, as a Religious Science minister friend of mine likes to say, “God doesn’t care what you call It.”

And here is the theological point, from a theology of omnipresence: there’s not a spot where God is not, and that includes the atheist. The Presence is in her whether or not she names it. And she may name it: creativity, imagination, beauty, hope, love, conscience. She embraces and exudes it. Is it natural? Supernatural? Real? Imagined? Who cares?! Goodness is everywhere and goodness is the point. Some of us like the poetry of religion but we must take care to not make the poetry into an idol.

Some of the most Christlike people I have known did not believe in Christ. The Christ (inward Light, divine pattern, human potential, divine spark, “that of God” in them) did not seem to mind.

That is why the third stream matters. It is the stream that lets both of them kneel there, and it is the one that keeps the church honest about what it actually knows, which is less than it says and more than it fears.

Chapter 23: Blended Worship, Blended Spiritualities

What people quickly notice about Sunshine Cathedral is our blended worship. We aren't tied to a single worship book, hymnal, or liturgical tradition.

There are always readings from the Bible, but often readings also come from other religious sources (A Course in Miracles, the Tao te Ching, Gnostic Gospels, the Bhagavad Gita, Sufi poets, etc.) as well as from secular sources (quotes from philosophers or social scientists or contemporary poets, etc.).

Sermons usually involve exegesis and exposition of biblical texts, but often also include stories from world myths, the Talmud, even from contemporary superhero narratives.

In a typical service you may hear gospel, classical, jazz, Broadway, and pop music as well as the occasional Country and Western song or grand old Protestant hymn from Charles Wesley or Martin Luther or Fanny Crosby.

We wear liturgical vestments, but from a variety of traditions, and we are Eucharistic, but the meaning of the Eucharist is unique to each communicant, and the focus of the Eucharist is love and spiritual unity.

Prayers (sometimes with a bit of adaptation) will be recognized from Buddhism, monotheistic Hinduism, Judaism, Anglican Books of Common Prayer, Roman Catholic practices, and New Thought metaphysics. Most prayers will be positive and affirmative in tone with a presumption of an omnipresent Love that is with us always.

And the theology presented can be boiled down to God is the power and presence of love, and that presence is omnipresent, everywhere, fully present. Every single message you hear at Sunshine Cathedral will feature that simple but powerful and life-changing idea: God is omnipresent Love.

Just as our worship is a blend of many ideas, experiences, and traditions, so also is our theology the product of blending.

We are historically affiliated with Metropolitan Community Churches, a movement started by a gay, defrocked Pentecostal minister (Troy Perry) with a primary outreach to LGBTQ+ people and an enthusiastic affirmation of LGBTQ+ people as children of God designed to be exactly who they are.

We are also affiliated with the International Council of Community Churches, the Divine Science Federation, and the International New Thought Alliance. For decades, we have embraced the principles of Progressive Christianity, the principles of New Thought, and the openness of spiritual humanism.

Progressive Christianity simply says questions are more important than the answers we come up with, that everyone is loved by God (or that God is love and therefore cannot reject anyone), that other religions also have wisdom and holiness, that science is important and not at odds with spirituality, and that scripture can be understood in a variety of ways and the best ways are those that promote justice, tolerance, goodwill, and peace.

New Thought began as an American healing movement in the nineteenth century. Their guiding principles were the omnipresence and goodness of God, the power of thoughts, feelings, and attitudes to help shape our experiences in life, and the use of affirmations and visualization to make prayer more effective.

Six Sunshine Cathedral clergy (including the senior minister) are ordained in Divine Science, one of the oldest of the New Thought ministries, and in the past two other Divine Science ministers and at least three Unity ministers (Unity is also a New Thought/positive Christianity movement) have also been on staff. Currently four of our deacons are also Divine Science Practitioners.

Finally, spiritual humanism is also part of the air we breathe at Sunshine Cathedral. Spiritual humanism affirms the innate goodness and potential of human beings, allows for spiritual community, spiritual experiences, and a variety of opinions about the existence and nature of divinity.

Examples of spiritual humanists (who might have also been Christian or Jewish or Muslim, etc.) include Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Roman philosopher Marcus Aurelius, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism Mordecai Kaplan, and founder of Humanistic Judaism, Sherwin T. Wine.

Spiritual humanists, while not being limited by dogma or creeds, value the individual spiritual experience and the insights that come from it and also value evidence-based science.

The Charge of Incoherence

The objection to all of this may seem obvious. From the traditional side: *you cannot read the Bhagavad Gita at a Christian service; you have made a buffet, not a church.* From the skeptical side: *you cannot be scientific and rational and still pray.* Nevermind that what we "can't" do we are in fact doing.

What some may call incoherence is simply nonconformity. We don't allow anyone, including our past selves, limit the endless possibilities of spirituality. We try to remain, as Ernest Holmes said, "open at the top."

Let me address the traditionalists. There has never been an unblended Christianity. The New Testament is written in Greek, the language of the empire, using philosophical vocabulary, Logos and ousia and pneuma, borrowed from Stoics and Platonists. The Christmas date came from a Roman sun festival. The Easter name in English came from a Germanic goddess. The cathedrals were built with pagan geometry, the chant was Jewish before it was Christian, the Christian calendar sits on top of the agricultural year that every religion in Europe had marked for millennia. Augustine plundered Plato and said so; Aquinas plundered Aristotle by way of Muslim commentators and said so. The purity the objection imagines never existed. Every church is a blend. The only question is whether the blending is honest.

Now the skeptics. The claim is that a personal Christ and an impersonal Divine Mind cannot share the same hour. But the Christian tradition itself has held both from the start. Eckhart preached Christ on Sunday and the modeless Godhead in the same sermon. Tillich wrote about the historical Jesus and about God as the ground of being in the same systematic theology. The Johannine writings say God is love, God is light, God is spirit, and also that the Word became flesh. The tradition has always known that the Presence has no face and that the Presence took a face (countless faces perhaps), and it has never been able to say how, and it has prayed both ways anyway. We are doing nothing the mystics did not do. We are just doing it out loud, on a Sunday, with a band.

What makes a blend coherent is not that its ingredients came from one source. It is that they serve one end. And ours do. The Wesley hymn and the show tune, the Anglican collect and the New Thought treatment, the Tao te Ching and the Torah and the gnostic gospel: every one of them, in our worship, is chosen because it says, in its own idiom, the one thing. God is omnipresent Love. Kindness is the highest form of worship. You are God's miracle. That is not a buffet. It is a chorus.

Three Streams, One River

I have used the image throughout this book, and here at the end of Part Three I want to say plainly what it means.

Progressive Christianity gave us Jesus, the Bible read as a library, the calendar, the sacraments (symbols, not sources of grace), and the conviction that the gospel is about justice. Without it we would not be a church.

New Thought gave us omnipresence as a working doctrine, affirmative prayer, at-one-ment, the Statement of Being, and the confidence that the Presence is in every person and available now. Without it we would be a set of good positions with hymns.

Spiritual humanism gave us the honesty to say what we do not know, the commitment to test every belief against its fruits, the welcome for science, and the room at the table for people who cannot say “God” at all. Without it we would be a sect.

None of the three can do what all three do together, and none of them, alone, would have healed the people this church was built to heal. The queer kid thrown out of a Baptist church needed Jesus back, on terms she could accept: that was the first stream. She needed a God who had never called her a mistake and a way to pray that did not cause her to flinch: that was the second. And she needed a community that would not ask her to believe anything she could not believe, and would let her belong while she figured it out: that was the third.

She got all three here. So did I. That is what the blending was for.

Blended worship and blended spiritualities: no wonder so many people with different backgrounds and different experiences find a home at Sunshine Cathedral. We are a blend of many ideas and practices making something new and exciting and inclusive. This experiment in blending results in a unique and joyous community celebrating and sharing this message: You are God’s miracle and not God’s mistake.

Part Four: A Different Kind of Church

Chapter 24: Who We Are

Sunshine Cathedral is a member of the International Council of Community Churches (which is an institutional member of the National and World Councils of Churches), Metropolitan Community Churches (founded by and with a primary outreach to LGBTQ+ people), and the Divine Science Federation International; is affiliated with the Global Justice Institute (at MCC New York); and is a supporter of the International New Thought Alliance.

A Short History

Founded in 1971—just two years after the Stonewall Riots—Sunshine Cathedral (originally established as Metropolitan Community Church of the Holy Spirit) in Fort Lauderdale,

Florida, stands as one of the world's most prominent progressive and predominantly LGBTQ+ congregations.

Foundational Roots (1970s–1980s)

The church traces its lineage to the founding of the Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) by Rev. Troy Perry in Los Angeles in 1968. A small group in South Florida began gathering to create a safe, affirming space for same-gender-loving individuals who had been rejected by mainline denominations.

Through the 1980s and early 1990s, the church served as a frontline sanctuary and pastoral support network for individuals affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, stepping in to offer funeral services, spiritual care, and hospice support when many traditional churches turned people away or ignored the suffering.

Rev. John Gill, a Princeton Theological Seminary alum served as pastor for eight years, helping anchor the growing faith community. He was succeeded by Rt. Rev. Grant Lynn Ford, an Old Catholic bishop and former Assemblies of God pastor who pastored the congregation for 22 years, expanding its community presence, physical facilities, and regional influence.

Under Ford's tenure, the congregation formally adopted the name Sunshine Cathedral.

Since 2006, Senior Minister Bishop Dr. Durrell Watkins and Executive Minister Bishop Dr. Robert Griffin have led the Cathedral. Under their tenure, the church expanded its theological framework beyond traditional MCC boundaries.

Sunshine Cathedral integrates Progressive Christianity, Humanism, New Thought/Positive Thinking, and Mysticism, framing spirituality as guilt-free, inclusive, and empowering rather than dogmatic.

Trans-Denominational Reach: While maintaining affiliation with the MCC, clergy and members come from Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Baptist, Pentecostal, and non-Christian spiritual traditions.

Beyond its physical campus in Fort Lauderdale, the church maintains an international virtual membership and broadcasts services worldwide.

How New Thought entered: My predecessor, Grant Lynn Ford, discovered and embraced New Thought while already in professional ministry and started teaching New Thought classes at the church and he became a life member of the International New Thought Alliance. He added readings from New Thought pioneers to the liturgy and included affirmations in the service prayers. My New Thought spirituality is why he recruited me as his successor. He incardinated me into the independent Catholic

priesthood and before he died, I ordained him a Divine Science minister. He is also the person who introduced me to the INTA of which I am a life member.

The Cathedral

Ours is what Rev. Elder Dr. *Don Eastman would call a “psychological cathedral.” We’ve had independent bishops along the way but ours isn’t a cathedral because a special chair meant for bishop is on the dais (in fact, there isn’t one). We do what ancient cathedrals did…we teach, we gather people from far and wide, we pray and worship, we provide spiritual resources and guidance to people from many places, we help other communities thrive. We are a cathedral, and sometimes (as is the case currently) we have bishops.

Our current worship space was built for Baptists, sold to Pentecostals, and then bought by our congregation (ecumenical LGBTQ+ disciples and seekers).

Our property houses our worshiping community, a Spanish speaking congregation, The Samaritan Institute (the educational arm of the Sunshine Cathedral and a ministerial school of the Divine Science Federation International), our columbarium/memorial chapel, the studios of Happening Out Television Network, a prayer garden, 12 step groups, and a food pantry that feeds tens of thousands of people every year. The Sunshine Cathedral also has a house for LGBTQ+ young people who need a place to land and regroup. It’s called the Sunshine Pride House. Finally, Sunshine Cathedral’s Lawrence/Lewis Center for Worship & the Arts serves also as the Sunshine Cathedral Center for the Performing Arts.

**Don Eastman pastored MCCs in the midwest and Texas, was the Vice Moderator of Metropolitan Community Churches, and in “retirement” served as an interim Executive Pastor in Toronto and as a Gap Pastor in Los Angeles. He has been a friend, mentor, and advisor of mine for over 2 decades.*

How I Got Here

Before moving to Florida I had been a lay pastor of a Religious Science Church in Bossier City, Louisiana, an AIDS Chaplain in Dallas, an interim pastoral leader of an MCC church in Waco, a pastor of an MCC in Longview, TX, an assistant pastor of MCC churches in Fort Worth and in Hagerstown, MD, a Coordinator for HIV and Educational Services for a non-profit in Fort Worth, and a pastor of an MCC in New Jersey. My experience as a pastor and my New Thought spirituality along with my liturgical skills and sensibilities (I was confirmed an Episcopalian and earned my Doctor of Ministry degree from an Episcopal seminary) made me a good candidate to follow Grant Ford. A regional elder (“bishop”) recommended me to Grant who then investigated me and later interviewed me and I was chosen to follow him as the Senior Minister of Sunshine Cathedral.

When I came to Sunshine Cathedral it was an MCC and a member of The Center for Progressive Christianity. In my tenure we have added the International Council of Community Churches, Divine Science Federation International, and the Global Justice Institute to our affiliations.

Sunshine Cathedral's Values and Spiritual Identity

1. **Inclusion.** Love is our greatest moral value, and resisting exclusion is a primary focus of our ministry. We want to continue to be the conduits of a faith where all parts of our being are welcomed at God's table.
2. **Community.** Offering a safe and open community for people to worship, learn, and grow in their faith is our deep desire.
3. **Spiritual Transformation.** Providing a message of liberation from the oppressive religious environment of our day is what guides our ministry.
4. **Social Action.** We are committed to resisting the structures that oppress people and standing with those who suffer under the weight of oppressive systems, being guided always by our commitment to Global Human Rights.

Sunshine Cathedral strongly promotes MCC founder Troy Perry's original Three-Pronged Gospel:

Christian Liberation (saved from hopelessness, degradation, and despair)

Christian Community (modeled after the healing love demonstrated by Jesus, inclusive of those who identify as Christian and those who don't)

Christian Social Action (justice work to build the kin-dom of God on earth)

Omnipresence

You will hear the word "omnipresence" a lot at Sunshine Cathedral. Sometimes "God" will simply be called "the omnipresence." Other times, you'll hear the same message stated as "there's not a spot where God is not." The theology of omnipresence is simply and clearly stated in Daisy Baum's book Studies in Divine Science (1909): "There is but one All. This one that is All is the living presence of God everywhere. This all-inclusive One is Love, Life, Wisdom, and Power. I am in and a part of this Presence now."

The INTA Principles

Sunshine Cathedral also has a long-standing relationship with the International New Thought Alliance. These are the INTA's stated Principles:

1. We affirm God as Spirit, Ultimate Reality.
2. We affirm that God, the Good, is universal and everlasting.
3. We affirm the unity of God and humanity.
4. We affirm the power of prayer and the capacity of each person to have an experience of God.
5. We affirm the freedom of all persons as to beliefs.
6. We affirm that we are spiritual beings, dwelling in a spiritual universe that is governed by spiritual law; and that in alignment with spiritual law, we can bless and harmonize.
7. We affirm that our mental states influence our experience in daily living.
8. We affirm the manifestation of the Realm of heaven here and now.
9. We affirm expression of the highest spiritual principles in loving one another unconditionally, promoting the highest good for all, ministering to one another, and living together in peace, in accordance with the teachings of Jesus and other enlightened teachers.
10. We affirm our evolving awareness of the nature of reality and our willingness to refine our beliefs accordingly.

The Points of Progressive Christianity

Sunshine Cathedral was formerly a member of the Center for Progressive Christianity and continues to demonstrate the five points of Progressive Christianity (formerly eight points but since 2022 condensed to five):

"By calling ourselves progressive Christians, we mean that we are Christians who…

1. Believe that following the way and teachings of Jesus can lead to experiencing sacredness, wholeness, and unity of all life, even as we recognize that the Spirit moves in beneficial ways in many faith traditions.
2. Seek community that is inclusive of all people, honoring differences in theological perspective, age, race, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, class, or ability.
3. Strive for peace and justice among all people, knowing that behaving with compassion and selfless love towards one another is the fullest expression of what we believe.
4. Embrace the insights of contemporary science and strive to protect the Earth and ensure its integrity and sustainability.

5. Commit to a path of life-long learning, believing there is more value in questioning than in absolutes."

Our Affirmations

Sunshine Cathedral's Affirmation:
Sunshine Cathedral is a spirit-filled community healing the hurts caused by hatred.
Previous affirmations:
Sunshine Cathedral is a different kind of church where:
Our God is love,
Kindness is our worship,
Compassion is our prayer,
The sacred value of all people is our creed; and
Healing the hurts caused by hatred is our mission.
Sunshine Cathedral is a different kind of church where the past is past, and the future has infinite possibilities.
Here at the Sunshine Cathedral we are seekers and students of Truth, empowered by Spirit, sharing the light with the world.

These various points, principles, and affirmations each reflect the love-ethic of Jesus and spirit of community and justice that form our identity and mission at Sunshine Cathedral.

What We Do

Sunshine Cathedral Ministries include:

- Sunday Worship
- SC Global Fellowship (members and supporters who live part or all of the year at some distance from Sunshine Cathedral in Fort Lauderdale)
- Religious Education (via The Samaritan Institute)
- Daily Power Thoughts in text (Mon–Sat at 9 am, Sun at 8 am Eastern time)
- Sunshine Cathedral Foundation
- Sunshine Cathedral Columbarium and Memorial Chapel
- Sunshine Cathedral off-site worship and meditation services (at ALFs and retirement communities)
- Sunshine Cathedral Center for the Performing Arts

- Sunshine Cathedral Pub (special space for SCCPA patrons, also used as Social Hall on Sundays, worship space on special occasions, i.e., Ash Wednesday, and available for rent for family gatherings or other celebrations)
- Prayer Chaplains/Practitioners of the Silent Helpers Prayer Ministry (never a charge for prayer)
- Pastoral Care Hospital Visitation
- Streaming Content (Midday Prayer Mon–Sat on Facebook; Queer God Squad discussing current events from a queer religious perspective Mon–Fri on YouTube via Happening Out Television Network; Sunday worship broadcast on Facebook and YouTube at 10:30 on Sundays; Divine Science Everywhere on Fridays at 4 on the New Thought Media Network; Just the Talk on Sundays on New Thought Media Network (homily portion of our worship service), and I am a frequent guest anchor on Queer News Tonight
- Written Communication (SunBurst newsletter in-house and on website; monthly column by Bishop Durrell in OutClique Magazine; direct emails to well over 2,000 recipients every week; and books, booklets, social media posts, and brochures by Bishop Durrell)
- Sunshine Pride House for queer youth 18–25 who need a safe landing spot to regroup and embrace life with goals, skills, and support (clinical services provided by SunServe)
- Happening Out Television Network
- ATOM (Traditional Oriental Medicine school uses SC for graduations)
- Children's World South Pre-school graduations
- Space and Resource Sharing (Latin Pastoral Ministries/AFCI, St. Paul International University via LPM/AFCI, St. Oscar Romero OCC, Gay Men's Chorus of South Florida, Twelve Step Groups, Women's Chorus of Broward, Divine Science Federation International, Global Justice Institute, etc.)
- Pantry/Food Sharing (helps tens of thousands of people per year avoid food insecurity)

Prayers, volunteer hours, financial donations, and shared testimony about Sunshine Cathedral is what makes all of this ministry possible (*Time, Talent, Treasure, and Testimony*).

Reading the List

A list like that can read as a brochure. Read it instead as a theology, because that is what it is.

Notice how little of it is Sunday. Worship is the first item and a small fraction of the whole. Most of what this congregation does happens on the other six days, and most of it is done for people who will never sit in a pew: the tens of thousands who eat from the pantry, the young adults at Pride House, the residents of the assisted-living facilities who cannot come to us so we go to them, the strangers who send a prayer request to the Silent Helpers and are never charged, the audience at a Center for the Performing Arts show who came for the music and left having been in a church without knowing it. That is what a theology of the least of these produces when it has a building and a budget. The list is Matthew 25 with line items.

Notice, too, how much of it is shared. A Latin pastoral ministry, an Old Catholic parish named for a martyred archbishop, two choruses, a medical school, a preschool, and Twelve Step groups that needs a room. A building that believes there's not a spot where God is not cannot keep its doors closed on weekdays. The space is the Presence, and the Presence is not ours.

And notice the streaming. The Global Fellowship, the broadcasts, the daily Power Thought: a congregation that was told for decades it did not belong in a church has built one that anyone, anywhere, can enter from a kitchen table. Chapter 25 says more. Here it is enough to say that the list is what the affirmations look like when they get up and go to work.

Chapter 25: How We Worship

A Sunday, from the Parking Lot

Before the explanation of the liturgy, a walk through it, because the liturgy is not a document. It is an hour that people live.

You arrive. Someone is at the door, and they are glad to see you, and they do not ask who you are or why you came. Inside, the room is loud. People are greeting each other, hugging, laughing; the choir is warming up; there is coffee somewhere. If you came expecting the hush of a sanctuary, this is the first surprise. Worship has already begun and nobody has said a word from the front.

A video plays: a snapshot of who this community is, faces and words. Then the pastors welcome you, and they welcome the people watching on a screen a thousand miles away

in the same breath. You sing. You will sing a great deal (15 or so songs in every service). The first song settles the room and joins your voice to a few hundred others, and something in you that came in alone is, by the second verse, not alone.

You say, with everyone, what this church believes. Not a creed; an affirmation. God is love. Kindness is worship. Compassion is prayer. All people have sacred value. You are here to heal from what religion did to you. You may not believe it yet. You are saying it anyway, and that is how belief starts.

A call to worship from the psalm: this is the day. More songs. Prayers that do not beg; prayers that declare. Then you sit, and you listen: a reading from the Bible, a reading from somewhere else, an anthem, a homily that will make you laugh at least once and, if you are new, will probably make you cry once too, because it will say a thing about God you were never allowed to hear. Then more singing, more affirmation, and the peace: people turning to each other, touching, saying it.

Then the table. Everyone is invited. No one checks. You go forward, or you don't; either is fine. Bread, juice, a blessing said to your face. The offering, which is a sacrament too, and which nobody will shame you about. Baptisms, if there are any, with water poured. Blessings for birthdays and anniversaries and whatever anyone brought to be blessed.

More singing. The last song is joyful and choreographed and the room is on its feet. The applause. And then the sentence: *our worship has ended, let our service begin.*

Between the services there is coffee in the Social Hall (aka The Pub), and that is part of it too. You will be talked to. You will be asked, gently, if you are new, and if you are, someone will tell you they were new once, and what it was like.

That is the hour. What follows is why each part is there.

An Explanation of Our Liturgy

GATHERING. As people gather and greet, worship has already begun. Our presence is the prayer that consecrates the hour. The divine light within us shines all the brighter when we come together. Before the first scripted word is spoken, divine love is already flowing and worship has commenced.

WELCOME. After the "opening package" (a video giving a snapshot of the character of this spiritual community), pastors welcome us into the space and into the shared hour. Those joining by way of streaming are welcome, too, and are fully part of the shared experience.

INTROIT. Now we sing (and we will sing throughout the hour). The first song of the service focuses our hearts and minds, and our shared voices remind us that we are deeply and forever connected.

AFFIRMATION. This reminds us of our purpose, our mission, our commitment, and shared values. We remind ourselves and one another that God is love, kindness is the highest form of worship, compassion is the deepest way to pray, all people have sacred value, and we are here to help people heal from oppressive theologies.

CALL TO WORSHIP. A reminder to be here, now. We live one day at a time; be present to this day, to this hour. It comes from Psalm 118.

PRAISE. More songs and prayer. You will notice that most of our prayers at Sunshine Cathedral are affirmative; that is, we aren't begging a faraway Being to grant us favors that It otherwise would not without our petitions. We are, instead, recognizing a living Presence that is everywhere fully present. We recognize the presence and tap into It, as it were, trying to cooperate fully with It to help our lives flow more smoothly. By focusing on our unity with the Source of all that is, we experience wisdom, comfort, hope, flashes of insight, strength, and an inner assurance that ultimately, all is well.

PROCLAMATION. Now we listen to spiritual instruction. There are readings from the Holy Bible and from other sources of sacred and secular wisdom. Truth isn't limited to a single book or tradition. We listen to a homily (message/lesson/speech/sermon) following an anthem. We sing a few choruses as well. All of these things are meant to share a "big picture" message of the day. Following the homily, we sing, we pray, we say affirmations, and share peace (and joy) with one another (Sign of Peace).

SACRAMENTS. A sacrament is an outward sign of inward grace. They are symbols reminding us of the power of love that is always within us. Sharing them together reminds us that we are all connected, always. The Sacraments we will share every Sunday are Holy Communion (Sacrament of Hospitality) and the Offering (Sacrament of Sharing). Baptism is by request.

The Sacrament of SHARING (the collection of offerings) supports the work of the church (that is, it is meant to be the primary way that we fund the work we are called to do together to bring hope and healing to the community and to affirm the sacred value of all people); to freely and lovingly share resources also releases energy within us. To give joyfully in support of a high purpose and shared cause is personally empowering and uplifting.

The Sacrament of HOSPITALITY (Holy Communion), usually recalling the legendary Last Supper of Jesus, is an open invitation to everyone regardless of church membership or personal belief to share in the moment together (comm-union = union with). Bread and non-alcoholic juice are offered along with brief blessings. It is a love feast wherein we remember that we are connected to one another, to the larger world, and to the creative source of all that is.

There is more praying and singing, and this is the time when baptisms (celebrating those of any age who are immersed into the life of our community; this is done with water poured), and confirmations (celebrating new members), and the Rite of Blessing (affirming love and best wishes for someone for a special occasion) can also be offered.

After the first service and before the second (10 AM) refreshments are served in the Social Hall. This is a time for first and second service worshipers to meet one another, for newcomers to get a sense of our community, and for everyone to enjoy coffee and treats. We regard this as an extension of our Communion service, the Sacrament of Hospitality.

Our service concludes with more singing and prayer, and after the final song (almost always a joyful, fully embodied, often choreographed song) there is usually an outburst of joy (thunderous applause) and then this commission: "Our worship has ended, let our service begin."

We then hope everyone will return to share the experience again the following week. For those who can't make it to us, we offer the 10:30 am service by streaming broadcast where every moment is shared live and people at home can even share Communion with us.

VESTMENTS. There are various historical (and frankly, cultural) reasons for different vestments. We don't all wear the same style at Sunshine Cathedral but allow each minister on the chancel to express their own style and preferences. Sometimes we look alike, other times its every robe wearer for herself. The main purpose of vestments is to add a sense of pageantry and celebration and to create an atmosphere that feels different from daily, mundane routines.

CANDLES. Candles simply represent the light of Christ and the power of Spirit. Additional candles can be lit in memory of departed loved ones. At the side altar there are more candles to aid with individual prayer.

MUSIC. Music is blended. You will hear Mozart and Debussy, Scott Joplin and Stephen Sondheim, Martin Luther and Charles Wesley, Marvin Gaye and Hank Williams, Mama Cass and Mahalia Jackson. And you may be surprised at how seamlessly sacred it is when blended together.

EXPANSIVE LANGUAGE. You will notice that in liturgy we are intentional about avoiding language that is sexist, racist, nationalistic, heteronormative, or demeaning of people from the various religions of the world. We ask people to participate "as they are able," and we don't refer to God/dess, Spirit, the Ground of Being by exclusively male names or pronouns. We are all made in the divine image.

As has been so eloquently stated in theological circles: "If God is only male, then only males are made in God's image." And we don't believe that to be the case. So, you'll hear

many different words referring to Ultimate Reality, and not one of them will be able to communicate divine Allness sufficiently. We rejoice in the truth that God has many names and remains a mystery beyond our naming.

The Congregation on the Screen

Every Sunday at 10:30 the service goes out on Facebook and YouTube, and people watch it from Memphis, Monroe (Louisiana), Los Angeles, Plainfield (NJ), Canada, Nairobi (Kenya), Rome (Italy), Jamaica, rural North Carolina, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Dyersburg (TN), San Diego, Indiana, Freeport (NY), counties throughout Florida, Ohio, Asia, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, and many more locations. Some are members who moved away. Some are snowbirds who live here half the year and want to feel connected the other half. Some have never been to Fort Lauderdale and never will. Some are in places where a church like this could not exist, and they watch with the sound low.

I want to say something about them, because the temptation is to think of the stream as a recording and the people watching it as an audience. They are neither. They are the congregation. They are welcomed by name in the opening, and it is not a courtesy. When the peace is shared, it is shared with them. When Communion is offered, they are told to take bread and juice from their own kitchens and hold them up, and the blessing is said over those too, because there's not a spot where God is not, and a kitchen table in Ohio is a spot.

The Global Fellowship is our name for the members who are far away, and it is a real membership with real commitments, the same four T's as everyone else (time, talent, treasure, and testimony). They give. They pray. They tell people. And the Cathedral, for its part, has learned that a church is not a building. The building is where the singing is loudest. The church is everywhere the singing is heard.

There is a theology in that, and it is the one this book has been telling on almost every page. A church that began among people who were told they had no place has built one with no walls at all.

Chapter 26: Twelve Steps to Recovering from Fear-Based Religion

Durrell W.'s twelve steps (based on Bill W.'s Alcoholics Anonymous program)

Why Twelve Steps

Alcoholics Anonymous has met in our building for a long time, along with other Twelve Step fellowships, and anyone who has spent time around those rooms knows why the program works. It does not argue with the addiction. It does not shame the addict. It gives a person who is powerless over something a way to stand up, one step at a time, in the company of others who have stood up before.

Fear-based religion is not chemically addictive, but it behaves like an addiction in every other way. It gets into you young. It rewires how you see yourself. It promises relief and delivers shame. It isolates you from anyone who might tell you the truth. And when you try to leave, it follows: in the voice in your head, in the flinch when someone says "God," in the certainty, decades later, that you are about to be found out.

People come to Sunshine Cathedral to recover from religion that has been cruel, irrelevant, or nonsensical. They need what the AA/NA/OA rooms give the alcoholic: a program, a fellowship, and a first step that begins with admitting the problem. So I wrote these, following the shape of the original twelve, because the shape was already proven. What follows is each step, what the fear-based version taught, and what the healing looks like.

Step One

I admit that oppressive theologies have instilled me with fear and shame which sometimes make life seem difficult to manage in healthy ways.

What fear taught. That the fear was necessary. That the shame was accurate. That a good person would feel exactly this way before a holy God, and that the difficulty of managing life was the difficulty of a sinner in a fallen world. The fear and the shame were not symptoms. They were doctrine.

What healing looks like. The first step is the hardest, as it is in every program, because it requires naming the thing as a wound and not a virtue. Most people who have lived inside fear-based religion cannot see it as oppressive; it was the water they swam in. The admission is the moment the water becomes visible. I was taught to be afraid of God. I was taught to be ashamed of myself. It has made my life harder than it needed to be. That is not blasphemy. It is the beginning of getting well.

Step Two

I believe that unconditional love can restore sanity to my life.

What fear taught. That love was conditional by definition. God's love had terms. Family love had terms. Church membership had terms, and the terms could change, and you could be out. The idea of a love with no conditions was, in the old theology, either heresy or naïveté.

What healing looks like. The second step in AA is coming to believe that a Power greater than oneself could restore sanity. Ours names the Power: unconditional love. Not a God who might love you if. Love itself, the substance of the Presence, which has no terms because it has no outside. *This is omnipresence as a recovery principle*. The person who takes this step does not yet feel the love. They believe it is possible, which is all a second step asks, and belief that it is possible is the crack through which it comes.

Step Three

I make a conscious decision and effort to let love be the focus of my spiritual path.

What fear taught. That the focus of the spiritual path was avoidance: of sin, of hell, of God's displeasure, of the wrong people. You did not walk toward anything. You walked away from things, watching your feet.

What healing looks like. Step three is the turn. In AA it is the decision to turn one's will and life over to the care of God as one understands God. Here it is the decision to make love the center rather than fear. A conscious decision and effort: not a feeling, which cannot be chosen, but a direction, which can. Every day the person in recovery asks, of a belief, a practice, a relationship, a verse: does this lead toward love? And follows the answer. It is a small daily reorientation, and over years it changes everything.

Step Four

I am willing to make a search and inventory of my fears, regrets, and mistakes.

What fear taught. Constant inventory, of the wrong kind. Fear-based religion is nothing but a search of one's sins, conducted nightly, with the verdict known in advance. The inventory was not a tool; it was a sentence.

What healing looks like. The difference is the word "willing" and the word "fears." The old inventory was compelled, and it counted only sins. This one is chosen, and it counts fears first, because in fear-based religion most of what got called sin was actually terror, and most of the regrets are about things done or left undone in terror. The person writes it down: what I was afraid of, what I regret, what I got wrong. Not to be condemned. To

see clearly. You cannot heal a wound you will not look at, and you cannot look at it while someone is shouting.

Step Five

I admit to myself the nature of these error-thoughts and hurtful feelings.

What fear taught. Confession to an authority: a priest, a pastor, a God who was keeping score. The admission went outward and upward, and it went to someone with power over you.

What healing looks like. This step turns confession inward. I admit to myself. The New Thought language is deliberate: error-thoughts, hurtful feelings. Not sins, which require a judge, but errors, which require only a correction. The person says, without an audience: I believed I was a mistake. I believed God was against me. I believed the people who threw me out were right. I see now that those were errors, and I see what they cost me. There is no absolution to receive, because there was no crime. There is only the clearing that comes from saying true things out loud.

Step Six

I become ready for these errors to be healed.

What fear taught. That readiness was irrelevant. Healing, if it came, came from outside, on God's schedule, for God's reasons, and your job was to wait and be worthy.

What healing looks like. Readiness is the whole step, and it is harder than it sounds, because the errors are familiar and the fear is home. Many people discover at step six that they are not ready: that some part of them prefers the old shame, because the shame at least made sense, and the alternative is a freedom they do not know how to live in. That is fine. The step says "become," not "am." Readiness grows. The person notices, some morning, that they would rather be well than be right about their worthlessness. That morning is step six.

Step Seven

I invite love to cast out my unreasonable fears and self-doubts.

What fear taught. That fear was the correct response to God. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," misread, became the foundation of everything. To lose the fear was to lose faith.

What healing looks like. The first letter of John says that perfect love casts out fear, and that whoever fears has not been perfected in love. The seventh step takes the gospel writer

at his word. It is an invitation, in the affirmative-prayer sense: not "God, please remove my fear" but "Love, which is already here, I open the door." The unreasonable fears, the ones that have no object, the flinch, the dread, the sense of being watched, begin to go when the person stops feeding them and starts feeding love instead. It does not happen once. It happens every time the fear comes back and the person, once more, invites the other thing.

Step Eight

I am willing to forgive myself and others for hurtful uses of religion or scripture.

What fear taught. That forgiveness was for the sinner to seek and the righteous to grant, and that you were the sinner. The idea that you might have something to forgive, that the church, the pastor, the parent might have wronged you, was unthinkable, because they had God's authority and you had none.

What healing looks like. AA's eighth step makes a list of persons harmed and becomes willing to make amends. Ours reverses it, because the person recovering from fear-based religion was more harmed than harming. Willing to forgive: the pastor who preached the sermon, the parent who quoted the verse, the church that voted, the self that believed them and did what it did in fear. *The willingness is the step.* Not the forgiveness itself, which may take years. The willingness to consider that forgiveness is possible, that carrying the pain forever is not required.

Step Nine

I choose to forgive myself and others and I expect healing from the pain of prior unforgiveness.

What fear taught. That unforgiveness was righteousness. Holding the grudge against yourself was humility. Holding it against the people who hurt you was, oddly, forbidden, so it curdled instead into something without a name.

What healing looks like. The choice. Not the feeling; the choice, made once and remade as needed, to release. "I release the past to the past," chapter 21 says, "and choose to live in the blessed, love-filled now." The expectation is New Thought: that the choice has effects, that unforgiveness was a weight, and that setting it down will change how the body feels and how the days go. People report exactly that. They forgive the pastor, not because he deserved it, but because the resentment was theirs to carry and they were tired. And something lifts.

Step Ten

I will continue to deal constructively with moral and spiritual issues as they arise and to forgive as often as necessary.

What fear taught. That moral and spiritual issues had already been settled, by the authorities, in advance, and that your only job was compliance. Dealing with them yourself was arrogance.

What healing looks like. This is the maintenance step, as it is in AA. The person in recovery does not finish. Old fears resurface; a funeral, a holiday, a news story about a church brings the flinch back. The step says: deal with it, constructively, as it arises, and forgive again. As often as necessary is the key phrase. The Christian tradition itself says seventy times seven. The person learns that healing is not a state but a practice, and that the practice gets easier, and that on the hard days it is still available.

Step Eleven

I seek through love of self, life, and others to expand my consciousness.

What fear taught. That consciousness should contract. Fewer questions. Narrower reading. A smaller circle of acceptable people. The world was dangerous and the safe thing was to close.

What healing looks like. AA's eleventh step is prayer and meditation to improve conscious contact with God. Ours names the means: love of self, life, and others. The love of self is the Gospel's "as yourself," the half of the commandment the fear-based church skipped. The love of life is the spiritual humanist's reverence for the natural world and human potential. The love of others is justice-love. Together they expand consciousness the way a lung expands: by taking in more. The person who once read one book now reads the Tao and the physicist and the poet. The person who once trusted one kind of person now finds holiness in the magi. The circle widens. That is the eleventh step, and it never ends.

Step Twelve

Having had a spiritual awakening because of Pure Love, I will practice in all my dealings the truths I've learned and am learning.

What fear taught. That the awakening was a one-time event, a conversion, after which you were saved and your job was to bring others to the same fear. Twelfth-step work, in fear-based religion, meant evangelism: recruiting people into the shame.

What healing looks like. The awakening here is because of Pure Love, and the practice is in all my dealings: not preaching, but living. The person who has walked the eleven steps carries the twelfth without announcing it. They are the one at the door who is glad to see you and does not ask why you came. They are the one who tells the newcomer, over coffee, that they were new once. They are the one whose life is the sermon, because it no longer flinches. The truths I've learned and am learning: present tense, both. Recovery is not a certificate. It is a way of being in the world that other people can see and, seeing, want.

A Word to the Person on Step One

If you have read this far and recognized yourself, and if you are somewhere around the first step, still not sure whether the fear was a wound or the truth, I want to say one more thing.

You do not have to do the steps alone, and you do not have to do them fast. *"The rooms downstairs" have a saying: it works if you work it. It also has another: one day at a time. Both apply.

There are people at Sunshine Cathedral who have walked every one of these steps, and some who are on their third time through, and those who have can tell you that the fear was not the truth, and that it took them a while to believe it, and that they are glad they kept going.

You are God's miracle and not God's mistake. Step one is admitting that you were taught otherwise. Step twelve is living as though you finally know. Everything in between is just walking (or however one normally maneuvers).

**12 step meetings often take place in church basements.*

Chapter 27: How Much Is Enough?

> *"A tenth of everything belongs to the Lord." (Leviticus 27.30)*
>
> *"The world of the generous gets larger and larger." (Proverbs 11.24)*
>
> *"Those who give alms will enjoy a full life." (Tobit 12.9)*
>
> *Jesus told a wealthy person, "If you want to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come back and follow me." (Matthew 19.21)*
>
> *"There were no needy ones among them, because those who owned lands or houses would sell their property, bring the proceeds from the sales, and lay them at the apostles' feet for distribution to anyone who had need." (Acts 4.34-35)*

We see generosity extolled throughout scripture. In fact, giving sacrifices of meat, grain, fruit, and coin were important elements of worship in ancient times.

National Public Radio asks us for money all the time. They need it to provide the programming so many people enjoy. Social service agencies ask us for money to help them serve their communities. Children's hospitals ask for money to help them research cures. Even political candidates ask for money to help them run for office and influence the direction of government.

Well, guess what: churches ask for money, too. And for the same reasons: to fund the ministries that are meant to bring hope and joy to people's lives.

At Sunshine Cathedral we ask you for time, talent, treasure, and testimony. That is, we ask you to attend worship, volunteer for a ministry or a project, support the church financially, and tell people about us.

And we ask you to go above and beyond. We ask you to make donations of non-perishable food items so we can feed people in need. We ask you to offer prayers for those on our prayer list. We ask you to support various projects such as our broadcasting and social justice initiatives. We even ask you to give a bit extra at Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter.

We use the gifts lovingly given to make happen all that we do. But how much is enough?

Well, we'll never ask "enough" because there will always be needs, so we will always ask. But don't get annoyed by the asking. We tell you (and show you) what we do with the gifts, and even when money is tight, we somehow make miracles happen.

And we know that not everyone can give a fortune, and not everyone can support every single initiative. So, what's enough to give?

In the end, you must determine what your heart is telling you to give. Never give your rent money, but we hope you will give generously and consistently.

Traditionally, churches asked for a percentage of your net income to support the church (usually 10%). But even 5% plus volunteer hours could make a huge difference if everyone did it. If that seems out of range, one could begin with 2.5% or 3% and increase it over time. What's important is that we give because we want to and because supporting something good gives us joy.

Now, after our primary commitment (whatever we give regularly to the church for ministry), we can give "above and beyond" to the projects that make our hearts sing. Food sharing, the streaming broadcast to continue to reach people all over the world, the Pillar Society (remembering Sunshine Cathedral in one's estate planning), extra gifts during holidays, and/or buying tickets or volunteering to usher for our many shows via the

Sunshine Cathedral Center for the Performing Arts are just some “above and beyond” opportunities that can make a big difference.

We know that some can give to everything, but many can only give to some things. Give what you can to the ministries you can. The most important “collection” are the tithes/pledges/offerings to support ministry in general. After that, whatever you can do “above and beyond” is helpful, but we’ll never ask you to do more than you can, and we never want you to give with fear or resentment.

How much is enough for you to share? That’s something only your heart and your bank account can answer; just know that whatever you give with love is appreciated and used to make lives better, locally and globally. Thank you for all you give, all you do, and thank you for daring to be who you are.

Giving in a Universe Where All Is God

The lesson above is practical, and it should be; money is practical. But a theology of omnipresence has something to say about giving that goes underneath the percentages, and I want to say it.

If God is all, both invisible and visible, if there is one Substance and everything is made of it, then the money in your account and the food in the pantry and the need of the person in line are not three separate things. They are one thing, in three places. *What you have was never sealed off from what your neighbor lacks.* The line between “mine” and “theirs” is real for tax purposes and for rent, but it is not real at the level where the Presence is, because the Presence does not have an inside and an outside.

That changes what giving is. In the old economy, giving is loss: you had it, now you don’t, and the church is grateful because it got something you gave up. In the economy of omnipresence, giving is circulation. The Substance moves from where it was pooled to where it was needed, and nothing is lost, because it was all the one Substance the whole time. “The world of the generous gets larger and larger,” and the New Thought teachers read that as a description of how the Substance behaves: it flows toward the open hand.

I am not saying you will get rich by giving. I said in chapter 19 why that reading is a betrayal. I am saying that the person who gives from a settled conviction that they are part of the one All gives differently than the person who gives from scarcity, and lives differently, and that the difference is visible. The fist loosens. The anxiety about “enough” recedes. The person discovers they were never a closed system and *stops behaving like one*. That is the prosperity New Thought was actually promising, and it is real, and it does not depend on the balance.

The Sacrament of Sharing

Chapter 25 says the offering is a sacrament, and I want to defend the word, because most churches treat the collection as the awkward part of the service, something to be gotten through with a soft organ and averted eyes.

A sacrament is an outward sign of inward grace. The bread and juice are the outward sign of a love that holds everyone at the table. The water is the outward sign of a life immersed in community. And the offering, the plate or the basket or the tap on a screen, is the outward sign of the truth I described above: that we are one Substance, circulating, and that the hungry are fed out of the same pool the rest of us draw from.

That is why we do not hide it. The Sacrament of Sharing happens in the open, with singing, as an *act of worship*, because it is one. The person who puts twenty dollars in the basket is doing the same thing the person at the altar is doing: acting out, with the body, a truth about the whole. To freely and lovingly share resources releases energy within us, the liturgy explanation says. Anyone who has done it knows that this is not a metaphor.

And it is why we do not shame anyone about it. The Sacrament of Hospitality is open to everyone regardless of belief or membership. The Sacrament of Sharing is open to everyone regardless of amount. Some people put in nothing because they have nothing this week; they are as much part of the circulation as the ones who put in a check, because the pantry is feeding them. *The Substance moves both ways.* That is what "sharing" means.

Chapter 28: Commitment: Time, Talent, Treasure, and Testimony

Commitment Expected of Sunshine Cathedral and Sunshine Cathedral Global Fellowship Members

We ask everyone who wishes to be part of the Sunshine Cathedral community to support it continuously by (T4 Stewardship = Time, Talent, Treasure, and Testimony):

1. Worshiping with us in person when possible, and virtually otherwise, every single week.
2. Sharing your gifts and skills, i.e., gardening, cleaning, proofreading, AV, ushering, playing an instrument in worship, singing in the choir, joining the Silent Helpers, helping with the food pantry, accepting appointments to committees, teams, or boards, and praying for your church daily.

3. Giving financially: giving what you can as regularly as you can is vital. We don't promise miracles in return for your generosity, nor do we threaten cosmic consequences if you fail to give, nor do we charge "dues" to be a member. We simply depend on the consistent generosity of those who call Sunshine Cathedral their spiritual home. A financially stable Sunshine Cathedral is a blessing to people all over the world. We ask members to make a pledge of support.
4. Share a good word about the Sunshine Cathedral. You can do this by inviting people to church or events, by giving someone a SunBurst newsletter, by hitting "Like" on our social media content and then sharing it, by subscribing to our YouTube channel, following us on Facebook and Instagram, letting people know about our daily Power Thought, sending links to our broadcasts to people you believe may enjoy them.

What Membership Means Here

Read the third point again, because it contains, in one sentence, the difference between this church and the ones most of our members came from.

We don't promise miracles in return for your generosity. We don't threaten cosmic consequences if you fail to give. We don't charge dues.

Each of those is a refusal of something. The first refuses the prosperity gospel: the promise that God will pay you back with interest. The second refuses the fear gospel: the threat that God will punish you if you don't. The third refuses the club model: the idea that belonging is a transaction and can be revoked for nonpayment. Most churches practice at least one of the three, and a good many practice all of them without noticing, and every one of them turns the Sacrament of Sharing into a fee.

What is left, when you take all three away, is a church that simply depends on you. There is no lever. There is no hook. *There is a community that will exist next year only if the people who love it keep showing up, keep giving, keep singing, keep telling.* That is a more vulnerable position for a church to be in, and a more honest one. It is the position of the family of choice, which has no legal claim on anyone and survives on nothing but people choosing each other, week after week.

So what does membership mean? It means you have chosen. Not that you have signed a doctrinal statement; there isn't one. Not that you have paid; there is no bill to pay. It means you have looked at this community and said: this is my spiritual home, and I will do the four things a home requires. *I will be here. I will bring what I have. I will share what I can. And I will tell people.*

That last one is the T most churches forget and the one this book is, in the end, about. Testimony is the oldest form of Christian witness: not argument, not evangelism, but "we went, and this is what we saw." The women at the tomb did it. The disciples on the road to Emmaus did it. Every person who has ever sent a broadcast link to a friend who was hurting, or handed someone a SunBurst, or said at a dinner table "actually, my church isn't like that," has done it. You are not recruiting. You are telling the truth about what happened to you, and letting the person decide.

The Fifth T

There are four T's in the stewardship formula. Someone suggested to me that there might need to be firth: **Trust**.

We give our time because we *trust* we'll be blessed and we'll somehow bless others. We give talent because we *trust* that the skill or passion or learning that we possess is worth sharing. We give treasure because we *trust* that we can share and still have enough for ourselves. We give testimony because we *trust* that our church is something someone desperately needs to hear about.

A church that does not promise, threaten, or charge is asking you to trust it: that the gifts go where it says, that the community will be there when you need it, that the welcome at the door is real. And it is trusting you: that you will come, and give, and serve, and tell, without being made to. The whole arrangement is held together by nothing but people believing in each other, and that is exactly as fragile as it sounds, and it has held for 55 years as of this writing.

That is not an accident of institutional design. It is theology applied. If God is omnipresent Love, and we are its individual expressions, then the community that forms among us should look like Love: no leverage, no threat, no fee, just presence, offered and received. The four T's are what that looks like on a pledge card. Trust is what it looks like underneath.

Conclusion: Our Worship Has Ended, Let Our Service Begin

Every Sunday ends with the same sentence. I have said it more times than I can count, and I have never gotten tired of it, because it is the whole theology compressed to nine words.

Our worship has ended. The hour is over. The singing, the affirmations, the prayers that declare rather than beg, the bread and juice, the applause: done. It was good, and it was for something, and the something was not itself.

Let our service begin. Now go and be what you were told you are.

This book has been long, and I want to end it short, by saying what I hope you carry out the door.

One Idea

There's not a spot where God is not.

If you forget every other sentence in this book, keep that one. It is the doctrine of omnipresence, and it is the ground on which everything else stands. God is not up, or out, or back in the first century, or ahead in a judgment. God is here, fully, as Love, Life, Wisdom, and Power, and you are in it, and you cannot fall out. Eckhart knew it. Spinoza knew it. The Brooks sisters in Denver knew it and wrote it down in four sentences so that a person who had never read a philosopher could say it in the morning. The psalmist knew it: if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

Everything this church does follows from that. The open table follows from it, because there is no one outside the Presence to keep out. The affirmative prayer follows from it, because there is no one far away to petition. The expansive language follows from it, because a Presence with no boundary cannot be named by one gender or class or ethnicity (or even species). The food pantry follows from it, because the Presence is in the person in line. Even the applause follows from it, because a room full of people who have just been told they are in God cannot be expected to sit quietly.

Three Streams

The idea came to us by three roads, and I have tried to honor each.

Progressive Christianity gave us Jesus, a peasant from an occupied territory who loved the unloved and was killed by the empire for it, and whom his friends could not stop meeting after he was dead. It gave us the Bible as a library and not a rulebook, the calendar as a way to live a story, and the conviction that the gospel is justice-love or it is nothing.

New Thought gave us the Presence as a working doctrine, the at-one-ment that says there never was a gap, and a way of praying that a person recovering from fear could actually do. It gave us a lineage of women who built churches when no church would let them lead, and a healer named Louise Hay who told dying men they were loved when their pastors would not.

Spiritual humanism gave us honesty. It gave us the freedom to say what we do not know, the welcome for science, the test that a belief is only as good as the life it produces, and the room at the Lord's Table for the person who cannot say "God" and nevertheless in whom the light of Christ shines.

Three streams, one river. None of them alone would have healed the people this church was built to heal. Together they made a place where a fifteen-year-old who was told her desire was depravity could walk in, forty years later, and hear that she was very good.

One Sentence

You are God's miracle and not God's mistake.

I have said it in practically every homily for years, and I have said it at the end of nearly every chapter here, and I will say it once more, because it is what the whole book in a sentence.

It is not a greeting card. It is Genesis 1, where the human being is called very good before. It is Psalm 139, where you are awesomely and wonderfully made. It is Matthew 10, where the hairs of your head are numbered. It is Romans 8, where nothing can separate you from the love that God is. It is the last two words of the second-greatest commandment, "as yourself," which the fear-based church forgot to teach. It is the Divine Science Statement of Being: *I am the individual expression of God, and ever one with this perfect life, perfect love, and perfect substance.*

And it is a medicine. The people who come through our doors have, most of them, been told the opposite by someone with a Bible, at an age when the telling went all the way in. You cannot argue that wound closed. You can only say the true thing, in a community that acts as if it is true, until it sinks below the argument. That is what the singing is for, and the open table, and the peace, and the coffee time, and the applause. That is what this book has been. Treatment, in the New Thought sense: the medicine of the truth, applied to a soul, repeatedly, until the experience changes.

Let Our Service Begin

So: the hour is over. Here is what I would ask: Go to peace instead of to pieces.

The setbacks will come; they are not a verdict on you. Stand on the ground the setbacks cannot reach.

Walk toward yourself. Whatever closet was built for you, the stone is rolled away. Come out. Light the way for the next one.

Wait on the world. Not for Jesus to return. Be the return. Feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, visit the prisoner, sit with the dying. Whatever you do to the least of these.

Keep the questions open. A God you have figured out is one more idol. Pray to be rid of God, and let God get bigger.

And tell someone. Not to recruit them. To tell them what happened to you. That you were told you were a mistake, and you found a place that said otherwise, and it was true.

There's not a spot where God is not. You are one of the spots. Our worship has ended.

Let our service begin.

Appendix A: Prayers and Affirmations

The Sunshine Cathedral Affirmation

Sunshine Cathedral is a spirit-filled community healing the hurts caused by hatred.

The Older Affirmation

Sunshine Cathedral is a different kind of church where:
Our God is love,
Kindness is our worship,
Compassion is our prayer,
The sacred value of all people is our creed; and
Healing the hurts caused by hatred is our mission.

Daisy Baum, from Studies in Divine Science (1909)

There is but one All. This one that is All is the living presence of God everywhere. This all-inclusive One is Love, Life, Wisdom, and Power. I am in and a part of this Presence now.

The Divine Science Statement of Being (Fannie James)

God is all, both invisible and visible.
One Presence, One Mind, One Power is All.
This One that is all is perfect life, perfect love, and perfect substance.
I am the individual expression of God and am ever one with this perfect life, perfect love, and perfect substance.

New Thought Affirmations (condensed from the INTA Principles)

We affirm God as Infinite Being, Spirit, Ultimate Reality, universal and everlasting.

We affirm the unity of God and humanity.
We affirm the utility of positive prayer.
We affirm the sacred value of all persons and truth that is found in multiple faith traditions.
We affirm that our attitudes and habitual thoughts influence our experience of daily living.
We affirm love as the highest truth, highest value, and holiest experience. Amen.

The Five Steps of Treatment

1. Recognition: acknowledge there is a power and it is available to us.
2. Unification: know that we are one with it.
3. Affirmation: declare the blessings desired as if already present or definitely on their way.
4. Gratitude: be thankful for the good the treatment is bringing about.
5. Release.

Prayers for Particular Occasions

See chapter 21 for prayers in time of fear, for someone who is ill, in grief, before coming out, before a decision, for the world, and in gratitude.

Twelve Steps to Recovering from Fear-Based Religion

1. I admit that oppressive theologies have instilled me with fear and shame which sometimes make life seem difficult to manage in healthy ways.
2. I believe that unconditional love can restore sanity to my life.
3. I make a conscious decision and effort to let love be the focus of my spiritual path.
4. I am willing to make a search and inventory of my fears, regrets, and mistakes.
5. I admit to myself the nature of these error-thoughts and hurtful feelings.
6. I become ready for these errors to be healed.
7. I invite love to cast out my unreasonable fears and self-doubts.
8. I am willing to forgive myself and others for hurtful uses of religion or scripture.
9. I choose to forgive myself and others and I expect healing from the pain of prior unforgiveness.

10. I will continue to deal constructively with moral and spiritual issues as they arise and to forgive as often as necessary.
11. I seek through love of self, life, and others to expand my consciousness.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening because of Pure Love, I will practice in all my dealings the truths I've learned and am learning.

The Commission

Our worship has ended. Let our service begin.

Appendix B: Glossary

Affirmative prayer. Prayer that declares rather than petitions: "God is with me" rather than "God, please be with me." The characteristic prayer form of New Thought and of Sunshine Cathedral. See chapter 21.

At-one-ment. The New Thought reading of "atonement": not a bridging of the gap between humanity and God but the recognition that there was never a gap. See chapters 4 and 19.

Blended worship. Sunshine Cathedral's practice of drawing music, readings, prayers, and vestments from many traditions in a single service, all serving one message. See chapter 23.

Denial. In New Thought prayer, a statement that dismantles a false belief ("I deny that fear has any power over me"), always followed by an affirmation. See chapter 21.

Divine Science. One of the oldest New Thought denominations, founded in the 1880s by Malinda Cramer and the Brooks sisters; several Sunshine Cathedral clergy are ordained in it. See chapters 19 and 20.

Expansive language. Liturgical language that avoids sexist, racist, nationalistic, heteronormative, or religiously demeaning terms, and that does not refer to God by exclusively male names or pronouns. See chapter 25.

Global Fellowship. Members and supporters of Sunshine Cathedral who live at a distance and participate by streaming. See chapters 24 and 25.

Justice-love. The refusal to separate love (private, particular) from justice (public, structural); love that sees systems and justice that remembers faces. The ethical center of Sunshine Theology. See chapter 5.

Kin-dom. Sunshine Cathedral's rendering of what most translations call the "kingdom" of God: a realm with no king, only kin. From mujerista theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz. See chapter 5.

Least of these. From Matthew 25: the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned, in whom Christ says he is present. The test of every theology. See chapters 2 and 5.

Miracle, not mistake. "You are God's miracle and not God's mistake," the sentence that ends every homily and states the Cathedral's doctrine of the human being. See chapter 6.

New Thought. A nineteenth-century American spiritual healing movement, rooted in Quimby and Hopkins, that holds God to be omnipresent Spirit, humanity to be one with God, and thought to have power. See chapter 19.

Omnipresence. The doctrine that God is everywhere, fully, always, and that there is not a spot where God is not. The center of Sunshine Theology. See chapter 4.

Pridetide. The month of June, observed at Sunshine Cathedral as a liturgical season. See chapter 16.

Progressive Christianity. The movement, shaped in the 1990s, that reads the Bible critically, welcomes science, honors other traditions, and holds that following Jesus leads to justice. Its five points are in chapters 18 and 24.

Sacrament of Hospitality. Holy Communion, open to everyone regardless of membership or belief. See chapter 25.

Sacrament of Sharing. The offering, understood as an act of worship and an outward sign of the one Substance circulating. See chapters 25 and 27.

Sacred value. The worth of every person, without exception, as an expression of God. The premise of Progressive Christianity and the creed of the older Cathedral affirmation. See chapter 6.

Silent Helpers. Sunshine Cathedral's prayer ministry of practitioners and chaplains. Never a charge for prayer. See chapter 21.

Spiritual humanism. The conviction that human beings are responsible for human affairs and that reason and evidence are the way to truth, combined with a retention of the best of religion: community, ritual, awe, and the big questions. See chapter 22.

Statement of Being. Fannie James's four-sentence summary of Divine Science, memorized by its students. See chapter 20 and Appendix A.

T4 / Time, Talent, Treasure, and Testimony. The four commitments asked of members. See chapters 27 and 28.

The Thing Itself. Ernest Holmes's name for the Divine: not a being but the reality behind all realities. See chapter 20.

Three-pronged gospel. Troy Perry's summary of MCC's purpose: Christian liberation, Christian community, Christian social action. See chapter 5.

Treatment. In New Thought, a structured affirmative prayer (recognition, unification, affirmation, gratitude, release) that treats one's own consciousness with the medicine of prayer to see and seize opportunities in life. See chapter 21.

Walk toward yourself. A rendering of the Hebrew lech lecha, God's first word to Abraham; used at Sunshine Cathedral for coming out. See chapters 2 and 16.

Appendix C: Further Reading

By Bishop Durrell Watkins

A monthly commentary in Outclique Magazine (since June 2024)

A Treatment A Day, Lulu, 2009

An Introduction to the Divine Science philosophy at Sunshine Cathedral

"Ezra-Nehemiah", The Queer Bible Commentary (2nd ed.), West & Shore-Goss, eds., SCM Press, 2022

Popular Entertainment as Queer Canon (Episcopal Divinity School DMin Thesis)

Saved from Salvation, Lulu, 2014

The Bible As Allegory (a course curriculum)

The Sacrament of Sharing, Lulu, 2014

"The Sacred Power of Drag" an essay to be published in *Legendary* (University of Delaware Press)

What the Bible Says About… (a course curriculum)

Wrestling With God Without Getting Pinned: Old Stories, New Thoughts, & Progressive Spirituality, Outskirts Press, 2010

On Jesus and the Bible

Adyashanti, *Resurrecting Jesus: Embodying the Spirit of a Revolutionary Mystic*

Dalai Lama, *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus*

Dan McClellan, *The Bible Says So*

Daniel A. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*

Davina Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*

Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Christianity's Dangerous Memory*

Helen Bond, *Jesus: A Very Brief History*

Jennifer Bird, *Permission Granted: Taking the Bible Into Your Own Hands*

John A. Buehrens, *Understanding the Bible*

John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*

John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*

John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* and *The Sins of Scripture*

Karen Armstrong, *The Bible: A Biography*

Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* and *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*

Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*

Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror*

Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth*

Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ*

Roger Haight, *Jesus: Symbol of God*

Ruth H. Green, *The Born-Again Skeptic's Guide to The Bible*

Scotty McLennan, *Christ for Unitarian Universalists*

Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*

On the Queer Christ and Queer Theology

Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*

Chris Greenough, Queer Theology: the Basics

Elizabeth M. Edman, *Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ People Know About Life and Love and How It Can Revitalize Christianity*

Jeff Hood, *The Courage to Be Queer*

John J. McNeill, *Taking a Chance on God* and *The Church and the Homosexual*

Kittredge Cherry, *Art That Dares* and *Jesus in Love*

Kodo Nishimura, *This Monk Wears Heels: Be Who You Are*

Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* and *Indecent Theology*

Miguel A. De la Torre, *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins*

Patrick Cheng, *Rainbow Theology* and *From Sin to Amazing Grace* and *Radical Love*

Troy D. Perry, *Don't Be Afraid Anymore* and *The Lord is My Shepherd & He [sic] Knows I'm Gay*

On the God Who Is Everywhere

Meister Eckhart, *Selected Writings* (Penguin Classics)
Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* and *Dynamics of Faith*
Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Over-Soul"
Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* and *The Energy of Prayer*
Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*
Alan Watts, *Beyond Theology: The Art of Godmanship*

New Thought and Divine Science

A Course in Miracles (Foundation for Inner Peace)
Agnes Sanford, *The Healing Light*
A.K. Mozumdar, The Life & the Way: The Christian Yoga Metaphysics
Charles Fillmore, *Christian Healing*
Claude Bristol, *The Magic of Believing*
Daisy Baum, *Studies in Divine Science*
Emma Curtis Hopkins, *Scientific Christian Mental Practice*
Ernest Holmes, *The Science of Mind*
Harv Bishop, *New Thought (R)evolution: A Powerful Vision for the Future*
Helen Zagat, *Faith & Works*
Joel Goldsmith, *The Infinite Way*
Linda Martell-Whitsett, *How to Pray Without Talking to God*
Louise L. Hay, *You Can Heal Your Life* and *The Power Is Within You*
Malinda Cramer & Fannie B. James, *Divine Science: Its Practice & Principle*
Mitch Horowitz, *One Simple Idea*
Morris Lichtenstein, *Jewish Science & Health*
Nona L. Brooks, *Mysteries and Short Lessons in Divine Science*
Ralph Waldo Trine, *In Tune with the Infinite*
Thomas Parker Boyd, *The Christ Science of Being*

Spiritual Humanism

Anthony B. Pinn, *Studies in Humanist Thought and Practice and (ed.) What Is Humanism, and Why Does It Matter?* and *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology*

Anthony Freeman, *God in Us: A Case for Christian Humanism*

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* and "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*

Sherwin T. Wine, *Judaism Beyond God*

The American Humanist Association, *The Humanist Manifestos I, II, and III* (americanhumanist.org)

Progressive Christianity

Carter Heyward, *Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right*

David Felton & Jeff Proctor Murphy, L*iving the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity*

Paul A. Laughlin, Remedial Christianity: What Every Believer Should Know About the Faith But P*robably Doesn't*

Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*

James Rowe Adams, *So You Think You're Not Religious?: A Thinking Person's Guide to the Church*

Philip Gulley, *Unlearning God: How Unbelieving Helped Me Believe*

Richard Smoley, *A Theology of Love*

Rita Nakashima Brock & Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, & the Search for What Saves Us*

Thomas Cathcart, *There is No God and Mary is His Mother*

Recovery

Alcoholics Anonymous (the "Big Book") and Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions

About the Author

Bishop Durrell Watkins, DMin, is Senior Minister of Sunshine Cathedral in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, a congregation affiliated with Metropolitan Community Churches, the International Council of Community Churches, and the Divine Science Federation

International. He is ordained in Divine Science, a life member of the International New Thought Alliance, and a longtime leader within the Divine Science Federation. He writes a monthly column for OutClique Magazine and is the author of books, booklets, and daily Power Thoughts for the Sunshine Cathedral community.