

# LEARNING TO TALK

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on the 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, September 18, 2016

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## A Romantic Celebration

I mentioned back in August that Tracy and I were celebrating our 40<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary, and we did something unbelievably romantic to make merry for the occasion.

We went down to Philadelphia to the Chemical Heritage Museum. They had some exhibits that were of particular interest, one for each of us. Tracy, being a chemistry teacher, was taken by the museum's display of chemistry sets throughout the decades, going back before World War II all the way up to the present. The exhibit showed the evolution of chemistry sets, how they had changed over the years. One of the main features was that these sets became safer as time passed, with fewer potential explosions and poisonings in modern chemistry sets.

Another aspect of newer chemistry sets is fascinating in that they followed societal trends as well, mainly in their advertising. I remember all too well the cover of an older chemistry set. One Christmas, I lucked out and received both a chemistry set and an erector set. That was a big year for me. If you were to look at the box, you would have seen three white boys playing with their chemistry sets. For decades, the pictures always showed white boys.

Finally in the early 70's, for the first time a white girl replaced one of the boys on the cover of a chemistry set. At the same time, while manufacturers were encouraging

young males to become doctors and scientists and researchers, the set makers decided that they should make something especially for girls as well. So they produced special, smaller chemistry sets for girls, thinking that they might be more likely to become nurses or lab technicians rather than doctors or scientists. Smaller, easier chemistry sets were made for girls.

Then in 1983, also for the first time, not on the cover of the box but in a magazine ad for Ebony, three black boys were shown playing with a chemistry set. Thus, you could see just from this one small change in advertising the way in which society has moved over the course of decades.

Now here it is, 2016, and I'm gazing at this display, thinking about it, letting it sink in, and one of my thoughts is a little embarrassing: We as a people, we as Americans have been slow to learn that girls can be doctors and scientists and researchers, and they don't have to limit themselves to being nurses and lab technicians. It took decades for us to understand that gender doesn't have a whole lot to do with what a person can become and what he or she is capable of learning.

And then in 1983, it was decided that black kids too can become doctors and scientists and researchers. And the feeling I had as I looked at this exhibit was that it does take us a while to move as a society into a new idea. It is a slow process.

## No Such Thing as Materiality

There's another area in which we've been slow to catch up, but this time for good reasons. They have to do with physics. Between the World Wars, in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Albert Einstein, along with a number of other prominent physicists, came forth with the idea that an elementary particle — a proton, a neutron, an electron, those things that make up the atom — isn't really as discrete as we thought. They aren't the little billiard balls that we learn about in high school physics classes.

Rather, what they are is the concentration of a field. So an electron has an electric field, a part of its essence that extends into space and time. The actual electron is nothing more than a concentration of that field, and actually no boundary exists as to where the electron is and where it is not. This principle became known between the wars, but I would bet that not one percent of the American population knows that even now.

One of the consequences of this fact of physics is that there really is no such thing as materiality, physicality. Einstein said it at one point when he pointed out that the field is the only reality.

These two examples illustrate the way in which we learn something quickly through facts rather than slowly as culture plods along. This raises two questions:

1. What are we as human beings? One of the facts about this question is that we aren't bodies after all. The body is a rather convincing illusion; it's not who we really are. Physics and theology both say now that we aren't material, we aren't solid. Pierre Teilhard

de Chardin said a whole generation ago that we are “spiritual beings having a human experience, not human beings having a spiritual experience.”

2. Another question is: What is this divinity that we have come to church for worship on Sunday mornings?

Let me read a couple lines from a book by Northrup Frye, a literary critic who died in the 1990's. In his book entitled *The Great Code*, he says:

“In Exodus 3:14 [the same scripture passage that Phyllis Martin just read], though God gives himself a name, he defines himself as ‘I am that I am,’ which scholars say is more accurately rendered ‘I will be what I will be.’ That is, we might come closer to what is meant in the Bible by the word ‘God’ if we understood it as a verb, and not a verb of simple asserted existence but a verb implying a process accomplishing itself.”

He then goes on to explain and concludes:

“But it would also be oddly contemporary with post-Einsteinian physics, where atoms and electrons are no longer thought of as things but rather as traces of processes. God may have lost his function as the subject or object of a predicate, but may not be so much dead as entombed in a dead language.”

That last line caught me because my job is to talk about God, and it's unbelievably frustrating sometimes because I don't have the language for it. I don't have the right words for it. And so, in Exodus 3:14, we have “I am

that I am,” “I will be what I will be,” “I was who I was,” all of which imply existence, existing, exist, being, being-ness. And pretty much, it’s like all of the above.

Therefore, conceiving in our mind about what God is, is pretty darn hard. What we do as a people is that we drop back and punt. We say, “Oh no, it’s God the father. It’s the Rock of Ages. Or even God as creator and prime mover.” Or one of the best metaphors of all is “spirit, breath and wind.” But these are all still just pointers, metaphors. They’re not the thing in itself, which we find so difficult to talk about directly.

Lots of theories so far. So let me ask the “So what?” question. Why should you care? Assuming you do, here’s the problem with primitive language about something that’s pretty important otherwise. When we conceive of God as Father, our belief system is immediately constrained by our experience with fathers, positive or negative.

When we think of God as an entity, as a noun, as something that’s out there, sitting on a throne that we pray to in heaven, it then becomes possible, and actually I would say inevitable, that we can conceive of ourselves as separate from it, and therefore, if separate, it becomes possible for us to be outside of love.

### **Heartbreaking Problem of Vet Suicide**

One of the aspects of our culture is for me personally one of the most heartbreaking

problems of all, and that is happening to our veterans. It really disturbs me at a primal level: Twenty veteran suicides per day in the United States, comprising 18 percent of all suicides per day. So while we’re here on a Sunday morning, one or two veterans will call it quits, and four or five others will also call it quits, just in the hour or hour-and-a-half that we will have been here this morning.

These people feel alone, disconnected, outside the circle of love. They have probably been taught about an angry, vengeful, judgmental God. Their worthiness, their sense of who they are as a person has been declining over a long period and begins to plummet further, despite being made in the image and likeness of God. But that’s not how they feel, such that finally they decide that they’re not even worthy of life.

As a culture, as a people, we have held primitive beliefs for a very long time: About women, about races, about God, as well as about our world and each other.

Enough already.

We are spirit, each and every one of us is a spirit, linked to each other, linked even to the entire biosphere in a way that cannot be broken. Therefore, we cannot be outside the encompassing love of God.

That’s the good news of the gospel.

*Amen.*