

Sermon for October 18, 2020 by Pastor Hanberry at Trinity UCC, Manchester, MD
"Thinking about God" in person live streaming (Ser20-40)

Exodus 33:12-23 and Matthew 22:15-22 (The Message)

Several years ago, Pat and I and our daughter, Sarah, and her fiancé, Neel, and Neel's parents and sister, took a two-week trip to India. While Neel was born in the US, his parents were born and grew up in Mumbai or Bombay. Our trip was part of a plan for Sarah and her mom and I to meet all of Neel's family and for an extended engagement party with their many uncles and aunts and cousins. It was a wonderful experience -- the food the very best, especially when we had Neel's aunts cooking in their own homes.

One of my desires for this trip was to learn about some of the Hindu wedding traditions because in about 7 months I was going to conduct Sarah and Neel's wedding here in Maryland. Many of the wedding guests were going to be either from India or family and friends from India who live in the US, and who are mostly Hindu, at least culturally if not religiously.

During five days of our trip, Sarah, Neel, Pat, and I travelled by car through the golden triangle...to Delhi - Agra - Jaipur to see the taj Mahal and the Red Fort and many other beautiful temples and masques... After visiting one of the sites, where we heard the stories of the three major sects of the Hindu religion and stories about all their gods and goddesses, I asked one of our tour guides just how many gods Hindus have. He looked at me with an almost whimsical look and said, "33,000 gods." "33,000, I exclaimed." "Well, yes, he said. We have so many it might as well be 33,000. There's: Shiva and Vishnu, Brahma who complete the Hindu trinity; Brahma as creator, Vishnu as preserver or protector, and Shiva as destroyer or judge. Each of these has sons and daughters and many avatars as their incarnations. Trust me, they're many, many others, maybe 33,000. Shiva's son, Ganesha, is one of my favorites. Indeed, the one Hindu god I brought back with me to study and discern just how Ganesh could be woven into Sarah and Neel's wedding ceremony - not as a god to whom we would pray but a "god" of the cultural traditions of India and some of the people at the wedding.

So, by this time you're wondering, ok, Gerry, does this story have a point? What's this got to do with us, what's all this talk about 33,000 Hindu gods and a little elephant boy god named Ganesh have for us this morning. Well, maybe obvious or not so obvious....As we read our continuing wilderness story from Exodus, there is a question about how many gods and what kind of gods the chosen people of Israel need to get through their long, awful journey to their destination... to the so-called promised land. It seems that Yaweh, the God who brought them out of Egyptian oppression, the God of their leader, Moses, isn't enough for them. At least they want to see more of God. The text

says, ¹² *Moses said to the LORD, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.'* ¹³ *Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight."*

So, we find Moses not only thinking about God, but asking God to "show me your ways." Is that not our own requests of God in these days. Perhaps, in these challenging times we are asking that of God more than ever. Or perhaps, in our weariness and doubt, we are not asking God anything at all. Therein lies the challenge of our times: What are we thinking about God. And what are we thinking about the location of God in our lives.

We might remember in a preceding story, the Israelites with Aaron's participation and in the absence of Moses, create a golden calf...another version of God. How many Gods do the Israelites need in their wilderness journey?

Frederick Buechner, a wonderful poet, pastor and writer, in his reflections on this text from Exodus, likes to refer to the Israelites as being fascinated with *"a God in the hand is worth two in the bush."* A little playful comment about Moses and the burning bush...I suppose.

Speaking of a "god in the hand," that's just what I have...right here in my hand...the Hindu god, Ganesh...Hindus believe that Ganesh is the Lord of Good Fortune who provides prosperity, and success. Ganesh is the god of new beginnings, the remover of obstacles and is considered to be the Lord of letters and learning. Imagine, the remover of obstacles and of new beginnings. What about that? I like that sort of god. That is indeed why I referred to this Hindu god of new beginnings and remover of obstacles in Sarah and Neel's wedding. We didn't pray to Ganesh but invoked the idea that the community of Christians and Hindus and some of no faith gathered around Sarah and Neel that day would support them in their new beginning in life.

Don't know if you can see this model of Ganesh...a little boy with an elephant head. Cute. So the god of choice of many Hindus is a little fat boy figure with an elephant head. Not so different in many ways from the fat golden calf-god Aaron and the people molded together out of their costume jewelry.

All this to ask an important question this morning: How many gods do we have in our lives? How many things, how many people, how many buildings and institutions have we turned into idols in the 21st century? And more importantly, how much allegiance and money will we give to support all of those, many of which have no connection to the God who brought the Israelites out of Egypt, no connection to the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ,

no connection to what it means to be one who loves God and loves our neighbor.

Today, for the first time in a while, some of us have come to worship in this place, this sacred space....this place where we might have placed God all this time we have been worshipping in other places. But you know God has been with us in all the other places we have worshipped since March 22. The One God we worship; the One God we serve came here with us today and goes with us as we leave. That same God is with all those who watch this service online and is present for those who worship with us by gathering around their bulletin and the scripture for today. This is the God who waits for us to be the people God is calling us to be. The people of Trinity UCC who Love people where they are and encourage them to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ. May it be so for you and for me this day. Amen.