Even though John Hassler Dietrich died in 1957, seven years before I was born, I consider this sermon an opportunity to introduce you to a dear friend of mine. For the more familiar I become with him and the parallels between our lives and minds, the more I recognize our kindred spirits. Although today marks the third anniversary since I began as your minister here, I was officially installed on November 6th, 2011, one hundred years to the day since John Dietrich gave his first sermon as the minister of our church. Just as I felt called to ministry by age five, Dietrich, whose middle name was given to him in honor of his family minister (the Reverend Jacob Hassler), also seemed destined for ministry at an early age. Like me, he began in a much more conservative faith. Dietrich began as a Calvinist in the Dutch Reformed Church. I began as a Southern Baptist minister. And we both left our conservative traditions to become Unitarians because we could no longer accept the superstitious tenants of fundamentalism.

My last call to ministry from a Southern Baptist church, back in 1987, was withdrawn after I openly admitted I doubted the Bible is the infallible Word of God, and that Jesus was divine, died for our sins, was born of a virgin, and rose from the dead. Similarly, his biographer, Carlton Winston, Dietrich’s second wife, tells us that during his heresy trial, “The suspicions of the committee were confirmed. He did not believe in the infallibility or inspiration of the Scriptures. Their insistence upon a particular interpretation of the doctrine of the Atonement left him quite cold. [And] He had ceased to give credence to the virgin birth or the deity of Christ.”¹ He also dropped the Apostle’s Creed from his services. But his trial and eventual conviction, which I’ll speak more of later, was as much about what he did believe as what he didn’t. “What is more,” Winston writes, “he accepted in general the theory of evolution. And the propositions of modern science seemed reasonable to him.”²

More importantly, both of us soon moved beyond just a “general” openness to science and reason, to eventually making it the cornerstone of our faith. Although he is remembered as the “father of Religious Humanism,” Dietrich’s faith in science led him to a deep understanding of our place in the Universe, and it is because of this cosmic consciousness, and the sense of awe and wonder it inspired in him, that I believe John H. Dietrich deserves to be counted among the world’s great mystics.

In one of his sermons, New Universes for Old, he gave a three page explanation about the origins of the Universe that, with the exception of the suggestion that Venus is likely the only other planet in our solar system that could support life, his 1930

---

² Ibid.
description is as good as anything else I’ve read. As I said, it’s lengthy, so I can’t go into it in great detail, but here are a couple of my favorite quotes that express the awe and wonder such scientific knowledge inspired in him. “If we could be transported in some magical way to an immense distance from the sun, we would see our solar system as a group of whirling balls about a great luminous center. And if we moved still farther away, trillions of miles, the planets would fade entirely from view and the sun would shrink into a point of light, like a star. For the sun is a star, and the stars are suns.”

Here’s another, “...space rather than mass is the real characteristic of the galaxy. Light, traveling at the rate of 186,000 miles per second, reaches the earth only eight minutes after leaving the sun; but the nearest star is so distant that its light leaves it four and one-half years before it reaches our eyes. And many of the stars in the Milky Way are so far removed that the light which we see twinkling in the heavens tonight left them in rout to earth before [human beings] appeared on the planet, scores of thousands of years ago.”

After going to such great lengths to explain the incomprehensible size and age of the Universe, Dietrich then takes us on a similar tour of molecular reality. “Stones and trees and [people] and stars—all are made of the same thing,” he said, “the differences being due only to the variation of electrons in the atoms, and the complexity and arrangements of atoms in the molecules, and organization of the molecules in the objects.” This reminds me of a film produced by the Smithsonian Institute entitled Cosmic Voyage, narrated by Morgan Freeman who takes us on an exponential journey of concentric circles outward, beginning with the hoop of the Earth all the way edge of known space. We then travel exponentially downward into a small water drop all the way to the quarks and gluons physicists say are the smallest known components of quantum physics—the very same technique Dietrich used in his sermon 85 years ago.

More importantly, however, are the profound conclusions he drew from this cosmic consciousness. “Thus the earth,” he said, “immediately shrinks from the position of the largest and most important unit of the cosmos to a ‘relatively insignificant and highly recent astral exhibit.’” Although Dietrich claimed to be an agnostic (not an atheist) on the question of God, he also thought the idea of the Earth as, in his words, “the chief product of the creative endeavor of God and the supreme object of his divine solicitude immediately becomes preposterous and is recognized as a primitive misapprehension.” For Dietrich, however, the question of God’s existence is ultimately irrelevant, for even if there is a divine creator, we have been left hanging alone in the immensity of space, just another cosmic spec of dust, and if life is going to mean anything it is up to us to make it meaningful. In another sermon, he admitted, “It is true that humanism calls upon us to give up the comforting thought

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., p. 17.
6 Ibid., p. 16.
7 Ibid.
of the fatherhood of God and the favoritism of a kindly providence,” but this was, by no means, a depressing thought to him. On the contrary, he continued, “it substitutes for these the assurance of the inflexible impartiality of immutable law whereby we can control and direct our own lives, and the almost ecstatic joy that comes from realizing that we are earth children and terminable thrusts of the cosmic life, and from feeling the divine thrill of the shared life as we strive together toward our common destiny.”

Finally, this cosmic consciousness, this awareness of the immensity of space and our inconsequential place among its endless sea of stars, made any discussion of God seem like folly to Dietrich. “The problems of cosmic reality completely outdistance the intellectual capacity of [humanity],” he said, “and one becomes appalled at the irreverence of the Christian clergyman, who talks about God and his purposes with the same intimacy that he discusses the activities of his neighbor.” And with this statement, harsh as it might seem to some of us today, Dietrich reveals himself to be a mystic who believes, as the Kabbalah says, “Every definition of God leads to heresy.” In his 1926 sermon, How the Gods were Made, Dietrich said God “is merely a concept which [humanity] formed to fill the great gap of the unknown to explain that which [it] does not otherwise understand.” Today we simply call this the, “God of the gaps,” but Dietrich, like all mystics, was far more comfortable with mystery and doubt than filling the gaps with inadequate answers. In his sermon he cites mystics like Richard Hooker who said, “Our soundest knowledge of God is to know that we know him not;” Baruch Spinoza, who said, “To define God is to deny him;” and Henry David Thoreau, who said, “God himself might prefer atheism.” Dietrich cherished his doubts, and, because of his experience of the great mystery revealed by science and reason, he concluded that today, “we have better reasons than our [forbears] to stand in awe and wonder.”

In brief, he defined Religious Humanism, which stirred in him all the passion, awe, and wonder any religion could, in terms of just four fundamental beliefs. The first is what he called, “the doctrine that [humanity] is an end and not a means toward something else.” In other words, every person has “worth and dignity” (his words), and must not be used as an instrument of God or by others to suit their own desires. Religious humanism is, thus, about equality and service to all people. “The second fundamental tenant of humanism,” Dietrich said, “is our faith in the possibility of

---

8 Ibid., p. 104.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., p. 16.
12 Dieetrich, ibid., p. 32.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., p. 33.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., p. 61.
John H. Dietrich

improving human life.”\(^\text{18}\) Here, Dietrich exposes himself as a visionary prophet who earnestly believed humanism’s message could be carried into “the world in such form as to make [humanity] despise things as they are and passionately long for things as they should be.”\(^\text{19}\) The third “fundamental doctrine underlying humanism,” he said, “is the belief in the fundamental unity of mankind and the necessity of bringing [people] to consciousness of this unity if a better world is to be established.”\(^\text{20}\) So religious humanism, like Universalism, is not only open to all beliefs that might lead to truth, but to all people regardless of their beliefs or any other arbitrary differences. If we don’t realize this, Dietrich said, then humanity is “hopelessly doomed”\(^\text{21}\)—a message that rings as true today as ever. Finally, the fourth tenant of humanism, he said, “is an abounding faith in humanity and its ability to create this better world.”\(^\text{22}\) Working together, relying upon our own hard work and good efforts, not upon magical intervention of a supreme being, we can, as Dietrich said, “remove mountains,” for “It is not faith in dogmas and creeds that the world demands today, it is faith in oneself and in one’s fellows.”\(^\text{23}\)

John Hassler Dietrich was born January 18, 1878, on a farm in Willow Creek, Pennsylvania, the youngest child of Sarah and Jerome Dietrich, doting parents and devoted members of the Reformed Church of Path Valley. As I said, he was named after the family minister in anticipation of his predetermined vocation, a destiny, though not forced upon him, that even little John seemed to embrace from the start. So his parents didn’t object when he took it upon himself to continue more than the rudimentary education expected of a farm boy, walking eight miles a day to and from the preparatory academy in Mercersburg. After arriving home, he helped his father at work, yet still managed to shorten the four-year program to only three, graduating as valedictorian in 1896. From there he went to New York, where he got a job with the Tribune Fresh Air Fund, a nonprofit organization that provided free summer vacations in the countryside for city kids living in the tenements (a job similar to one I had working with the kids living in the government projects on the lower Eastside of Manhattan when I was eighteen).

Dietrich earned enough in a summer to enter Franklin and Marshall College in the fall of 1896. Ben Franklin had been among the school’s Board of Directors and one of its chief benefactors. It was also the school where Dr. Phillip Schaff taught church history, the only man, other than Dietrich, ever to be indicted for heresy by the Reformed church. Dr. Schaff, however, was acquitted. Dietrich was not.

Upon graduating he needed to earn money before he could afford to enter the seminary. He took a job teaching math and Latin at Mercersburg Academy, then English and history at Nyack Military Academy, and then became the private

\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 63.
\(^{19}\) Ibid.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 64.
\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 65.
\(^{22}\) Ibid.
\(^{23}\) Ibid., p. 66.
secretary of New York millionaire, Jonathan Thorne, who grew so fond of him that when he finally left for seminary, the tycoon remarked, “Mr. Dietrich, it is like having one of my boys leave home.”

He continued to work for Thorne during his summers, but attended Eastern Theological Seminary in Lancaster, Pennsylvania from 1902 to 1905. By then he already considered himself a religious liberal but, as Winston writes, “Unfortunately, too, he was a Unitarian when he was preparing for the ministry of the Reformed Church—though quite unconsciously.” Dietrich was an outstanding student, earning the privilege of delivering the paper on Church Doctrine during his graduation, which, according to Winston, became “the first inkling of his future trouble with the church.” For Dietrich had written a paper that treated the death of Jesus as but a human event resulting from his political action, not discussing it as an act of atonement for the sins of the world. He also called upon others to emulate Jesus’ behavior rather than merely revering him. While one of his respected professors agreed with Dietrich in private, he warned it could not be read as it stood during commencement and offered to edit it for him. Dietrich reluctantly agreed to soften the language himself as much as he could, but lost respect for his cowardly professor in the process.

Dietrich would serve only three congregations during his 36 years of professional ministry, the first of which was St. Mark’s Reformed Church in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, beginning in 1905. Although he enjoyed his ministry at St. Mark’s, it was the ministry that would end with him being convicted for heresy. It should be noted, however, there were also political motivations behind his indictment. St. Mark’s was founded by a prominent family that expected special attention from its minister, an expectation Dietrich failed to meet. About four years into his ministry he received a letter from Paul Wolfe, the founder’s son, complaining about Dietrich’s introduction of a new hymnal and new order of service. Although he wasn’t a member of St. Mark’s, Wolfe, representing his family, threatened that his mother and sister would halt their large contributions if he didn’t return things to normal, by which he meant “a churchly church.” His letter also accused Dietrich of being a Unitarian. Dietrich was courteous in his rebuff, but ended it by saying, “I learned long ago that it is impossible to please everyone in a congregation. What please one displeases another, and the only policy is to sail ahead according to one’s own ideas of right, regardless of the opinions of others.” (This is another opinion Dietrich and I share in common.)

Another political factor behind the heresy trial was Dietrich’s enormous popularity among other churchgoers in Pittsburg. His sermons were drawing attendees away from other congregations, which made him unpopular among other ministers. In

---

24 Winston, ibid., p. 34.
25 Ibid., p. 43.
26 Ibid., p. 45.
27 Ibid., p. 61.
just four years his membership had doubled and attendance during his services tripled. Nevertheless, after Dietrich tenured his resignation in light of the heresy allegations, his congregation passed a unanimous resolution on May 31\textsuperscript{st}, 1910, stating, in part, “Be it resolved, that we, the Consistory of St. Mark’s Memorial Reformed Church, who earnestly and heartily approve of Mr. Dietrich’s policy, refuse to accept his resignation and request him to continue his previous untiring efforts…”\textsuperscript{28} Nevertheless, on July 10, 1911, the Allegheny Classis convened, interrogated Dietrich, and found him guilty of heresy, again, only one of two men ever to be accused of heresy by the reformed church, and the only man ever to be convicted. The details of the trial are too lengthy to go into, but one of the charges against him, for example, resulted from a sermon he gave in April of 1911 stating, “The idea of substituting somebody else’s punishment for the man who deserves it, of giving goodness to the man who is not good, of delivering a man from hell on that account, and of admitting him into heaven among the saints by a transaction like that is worthy only of medieval subtlety and superstition. It can have no place in the mind of educated and enlightened modern [people].”\textsuperscript{29}

As painful as it was for him and his beloved congregation, Dietrich gave his last sermon and quietly walked out of St. Mark’s on July 2, 1911. His Unitarian friends had watched the proceedings closely and were eager to invite him into the Unitarian fold. He instantly received an invitation to become the associate minister of the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburg, but reluctantly decided it was too close to St. Mark’s and would not be ethical. He then candidated at three Unitarian Churches, one of which called him immediately. Before he heard from the others, however, he received a telegram from our congregation here in Spokane, inviting him to candidate. According to his biography a young reporter who had been in Pittsburg during the heresy trial had joined the Spokesman review, and once he found out Dietrich had become a Unitarian minister he contacted the church and urged them to invite him to come to Spokane. Winston writes, “Some other church would snap him up, the reporter feared, if the Spokane church did not act immediately.”\textsuperscript{30}

Dietrich accepted the invitation, but had no intention of accepting a call to Spokane. He wanted to seize the opportunity, rather, to visit a young woman, Louis Erb, whom he’d met on a cruise and had a romantic interest in. She lived in Wisconsin, and he thought he could see he on his return trip. Having never ventured West, however, Dietrich was left almost breathless by the natural beauty he encountered and fell instantly in love with Spokane. He even liked, “the drab ungainly church,”\textsuperscript{31} as Winston described it. “Yes, he liked it here, far more than the smoke-laden air of Pittsburg. This was a land to love. A clean earth. And strong. A land of challenge, not

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p. 65.  
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 79.  
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., p. 95.  
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., p. 93.
confining, but new and variable.”

His sermon was met with great enthusiasm and Dietrich accepted the call to ministry in Spokane.

As short time later he married Louis Erb and they started a family. During his five years in Spokane, from 1911 to 1916, Dietrich grew in popularity, so much so that the sixty-member church eventually had to move to a bigger venue, first into what was then the City Auditorium, and then into the newly constructed Clemmer Theatre, now the Bing, to preach to an audience of a thousand or more. Part of his popularity arose because he wasn’t afraid to discuss controversial issues, including a series on war that concluded with a sermon entitled, “War is Never Justifiable.” It was also during his time here that our church invited Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood to come to Spokane. Dietrich followed it up with a pro.birth control sermon entitled, “The Right to be Well Born.” He even allowed her pamphlets to be sold during services at the theatre, which caused quite a stir around town. Other, more orthodox Christian ministers began heckling him in newspaper articles, including a Presbyterian minister who complained that during Dietrich’s message at a Baccalaureate service at North Central High School, “the Deity was named but once (and that in a hymn) in yesterday’s exercises, that Christ was mentioned not at all.”

More importantly, it was here in Spokane that Dietrich first began referring to his religion as Humanism. According to his biography this was largely due to a variety of contemporary books he read, most of which he discovered listed in the back of a book published by the Rationalist Press that had been given to him by one of our church members. He was already familiar with the word Humanism in reference to the Renaissance, but it was its use in an article published by the British Ethical Societies about Auguste Comte’s philosophy of Positivism that caught his attention. Without going into Positivism, it is sufficient to say it has been “loosely defined as the religion of humanity,” which the author of this particular article shortened to “humanism.” Dietrich realized, according to Winston, “This age honored word would be a good name for his interpretation of religion in contrast to theism.”

About a year later Dietrich reluctantly decided to move to the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis (in 1916). This was a difficult decision because he loved Spokane, loved our church, and our church loved him, but he also thought, especially in a world without the benefit of today’s communication technologies, that he would be better able to promote Humanism, his fledgling child, in a place less isolated. Toward this end, it turned out to be a wise move. He served the Minneapolis congregation for twenty years before retiring, preaching to thousands from what became known as The Humanist Pulpit. It was there he experienced most of his life, a child’s crippling accident, the death of his wife, remarriage, and retirement. In the midst of

---

32 Ibid., p. 94.
33 Ibid., p. 109.
34 Ibid., p. 122.
35 Ibid.
it all, he sparked a controversy in our denomination that would change it forever, a controversy that remains, at least, a discussion among us—can we have religion without God?

He wasn’t offended by the word God, as many humanists are accused of being. He just didn’t think it relevant. Those who find Humanism’s notion of religion without God absurd “have not,” Dietrich said, “been able to sound the depths of its mystic meaning.” Those who too easily stigmatize its devotion to reason and reality as cold and meaningless miss its profound call to life and purpose. Again, as Dietrich put it, “Our sojourn here becomes a wonder-awakening romance, a pilgrimage through mysteries and marvels, and as we walk together, comforting each other, inspiring each other, helping each other, loving each other, our hearts burn within us.” And for those who still think there is something missing from Humanism, he asked us to keep in mind, “Humanism robs [us] of nothing that actually exists.”

In closing, to what is a longer sermon than usual, I know, but one, I hope, that is worthy of Dietrich whose own sermons usually lasted more than an hour, I would add, though he is remembered as the “Father of Religious Humanism,” I don’t believe Dietrich invented something new at all. It was the freedom he discovered in Unitarianism that allowed him to explore new ideas, and Unitarianism’s emphasis upon Jesus’ humanity and the humanistic nature of his practical teachings, that helped John Dietrich articulate something that has always been essential to our faith. Dietrich was more a midwife than a father to an offspring that could have only come from Unitarianism, and will remain a member of our family forever. Nor do I believe it was an accident that he first found this freedom here, in Spokane, in a church with bylaws, established in 1888, thirteen years before his arrival that expressed the tenants of the Humanist Manifesto he wouldn’t help author and sign until 1933. “The authority of [our] belief is reason,” our bylaws stated, “the method of findings its beliefs is scientific. It’s aim is to crush superstition and establish facts of religion,” and its, “First principle is freedom of opinion and is subject to no censure for heresy.”

So I don’t believe it was an accident that John H. Dietrich discovered religious humanism here in Spokane, among a group of Unitarians who had already embraced reason and heretics alike, and had long before planted the seed of humanism in the fertile soil of our bylaws. I am honored to stand in Dietrich’s pulpit a century later, and we can all share in his rich legacy, for during his short time here, our church became the birthplace of Religious Humanism.

---

36 Dietrich, ibid., p. 102.
37 Ibid., p. 104.
38 Ibid.