

May 3, 2009

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John 12: 35-37, 42-47

Where is God When You Don't Believe in God?

Imagine you're at a dinner party when someone announces, "I don't believe in God." Or perhaps they are more specific and say, "I don't go to church because what use is God if the world is full of senseless violence, the church is full of hypocrites, and no one likes to wear dress clothes and sit on uncomfortable church pews." Some people love making these dramatic statements because they know there is nothing you can say in response that will convince them to believe otherwise. Why is that? Because they have set up a false equation: So long as there is one hypocrite in the church, so long as one child dies tragically of cancer, so long as Sunday morning consists of dress clothes and hard pews, therefore there must not be a God. But that is a nonsense equation.

However, I'm not going to talk about that now. This sermon is not about whether God exists. It has a narrower focus shaped around this question: Where is God when you don't believe in God? What happens after you say "I don't believe in God"? Does God stomp out of the room, slam the door and sulk in the corner until we come back and apologize? Does God begin working intentionally to cause bad things to happen to you, or at least showers good things upon those on God's side while withholding blessings from anyone not playing on God's team? Or does God act with total impartiality in the world, offering the same grace, the same blessings, the same hope to every person in every land, which sounds lovely and wonderfully inclusive, but which begs the question "What difference then does it make whether I believe in God or not, since the results are absolutely the same?"

To preach a sermon about God, I need an initial point of reference. For Christians that point of reference is usually the bible, so from the verses I just read, let's tentatively approach our topic. The first 12 chapters of John's gospel are often called the Book of Signs, because they describe seven signs or miracles performed by Jesus to point others toward the reality of God. Jesus turned water into wine, fed the 5000, healed the blind and lame, and raised Lazarus from the dead. Then comes a short summary, from which I read eight verses, including the brutally honest comment: "Although Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him" (Jn 12:37).

Four quick observations from these verses. First, have you noticed how Jesus often talks about light and darkness? *The light is with you now; walk while you have the light, because in the darkness you do not know where you are going.* Too often we think conversations about God need to involve legal categories: right and wrong, law and commandments, truth vs. unbelief. Jesus invariably used organic categories: bread of life, living water, seeds producing fruit, walking in the light versus stumbling in the dark. There is a self-evident clarity that comes from this language, and what better quality to have when speaking about something as hard to express as God? Legal arguments usually aren't very convincing when talking with others about God, so try talking about light, hope, and all the God-given things that nurture life.

Second, doubt and belief exist side-by-side. They're like passengers flying coach on the tiny commuter jets they use now. They are experiences that exist as close together as the words spoken in Mark 9 by the poor father of the epileptic boy, "I believe; help my unbelief!" John tells how people witnessed Jesus' signs, yet still did not believe in him. John also mentions how people in positions of authority were moved by what Jesus did, but were afraid to acknowledge Jesus as Lord for fear of what others might say. Christopher Buckley recently wrote that the fiercest battles he had with his famous father, William Buckley, were invariably over religion until, as he put it, I grew tired of this personal Hundred Years' War and "my agnosticism, once defiant, had gone underground. I no longer had the desire to nail my theses to his church door."¹ For every Christian who has remained silent about faith when he or she should have spoken up, there is an agnostic who has remained silent about doubt when he or she should have acknowledged it honestly. Side by side we fly through life, both groups saying "I would like to believe; help my unbelief." Yet these prayers are almost impossible to answer so long as they remain underground and unexpressed. We are all called to be honest about that in which we believe and that in which we have our sincere doubts.

Third, in its best form, faith always has a quality of transparency. An act of true love does not cause our gaze to stop on the one loving but extends our field of vision to appreciate a larger perspective of "love." An act of courage does not limit our appreciation to the courageous actor, but points us toward a broader reality of what virtue and courage and justice are all about. Jesus said, "To believe in me is not to believe in just me but in the One who sent me. To see me is not just to see me but to recognize the One who sent me. (Jn 12:44-45). There is no conversation you can have with anyone that will bring God clearly into focus. But there are hundreds of things you can point to through whose transparency we glimpse some of the splendor we associate with God. Life is full of sacred prisms that refract our vision enough to allow a glimpse of heaven. Our calling is to be so transparent that the light that shines and the sacred goodness that enlivens may be visible through us so that others, by grace, will trust this same light and holy love.

Fourth, though Jesus repeatedly said "I came not to judge the world but to save the world," the church for too long has been cast in the role of judge, not savior. Susan, in one of her recent CDs, regularly touches on this theme. One song asks, "If God is great and God is good, why is your heaven so small?" Another asks plaintively, "How do you love those who never will love you?" This issue ties into the earlier comments on transparency. The phrase "Jesus is the way" should never be followed by the comment "and I alone possess the roadmap to show you the way." At best we are humble companions on the road to heaven, not gatekeepers guarding the doors of heaven.

Light and darkness. Doubt and belief. Transparency. Having offered those words, how do we respond when someone says, "I don't believe in God"? One option is to offer some version of Pascal's wager that I mentioned earlier. Act as if you believe in God, because if there is a God, you'll possibly gain eternal life. If God doesn't exist, well, you

haven't lost anything and perhaps your good deeds will have made the world a little better place. That's a pragmatic response, but frankly not a very inspiring one. Another option was recently suggested by Nicholas Ayo, a Catholic priest writing in the Notre Dame magazine. He suggested that if the conversation is about "Where is God?", it is important to be clear about your starting point and honest about the length of your intellectual journey ahead. If you begin by thinking, *I exist – I am here, but where is God?* – then the journey will involve a long road. If you begin by thinking, *God exists – God is here, so where am I?* - then the road you travel will be shorter.² To begin with "I am here; where is God?" is to try to move from the known to what is ultimately unknowable, from the finite to the infinite. And if you will only be satisfied when the unknowable, inexpressible, infinite and eternal One manages to be squeezed and comprehended inside your tiny human brain, then you will travel a very long road indeed. And you will encounter a lot of obstacles along the way, such as Why is there war and disease, tragedy and death if God is God of all?

But if you decide, even briefly, to try the flip side of the equation – to trust a word of scripture or a testimony of faith just long enough to say, "God is here, so where am I?" – that road is much shorter. We are the question; not God. We are what's knowable, what's expressible and finite and roughly able to be comprehended by our tiny human brains. We are the question, not God. We are the ones to be asked about war and disease, poverty and violence, death and life. We are the question that is to be argued about at dinner parties or when seated next to someone on cramped commuter airplanes. But because we like to divert attention away from ourselves and change the subject, we turn the conversation on its head and insist that God is the question. Where is God when this happens or this doesn't happen? No, instead we should ask, Where are we when this happens or doesn't happen? - We who are part of a creation shaped by God and intended by God to look much, much different.

As Fr. Ayo has said, belief is a matter of trust from the heart more than an argument in the head. God does not go away when we do not believe in God. God is neither indifferent nor uninvolved. God is here? Where are we? That is why we should not be indifferent as to whether people believe in God or not. It matters a lot for us, for others, for the world. As Joan Chittister has remarked, the primary theological question is not whether there is life after death, but whether there is life before death.

Light and darkness. Doubt and belief. Transparency. God is here; where am I? For we are the question, not God. Ultimately it is a question of trust, of choosing where you wish to stand as you ask these questions. May that place be for you a place of light. May that place allow you to see beyond the here and now to the eternal and loving. May that place connect you in love to others and to all time. And may that moment begin now, this very day. God is here.

AMEN

¹ Christopher Buckley, "Mum and Pup and Me," *New York Times Magazine*, April 26, 2009, p. 23.

² Nicholas Ayo, "The Where of God", *Notre Dame Magazine*, Spring 2009.