



“Can the Church Revive Our Sense of Enchantment with the World?”

Scripture – Mark 6:1-6

Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, November 5, 2017

Today is sermon #3 in a series on why the Christian Church is essential for the wellbeing of the world. In the opening sermon we named some of the church’s ugly blemishes along with its lasting contributions. One of the key roles the Church can play is to serve as a counterpoint to skewed values that destroy lives and undermine the trust that binds a society together.

Sermon #2 noted that in a world where people are increasingly isolated from one another, the church can play a vital role in bringing people together in community. In our fractured world, we need people who will love us, inspire us, challenge us, and support us. The church can be that place.

Today we focus on the negative consequences of the modern worldview which leads to atheism, and ponder ways that in a postmodern world the church can help us recover a sense of wonder by revealing ways we experience God.

Theologian, David Ray Griffin, lists five negative consequences that result from the loss of belief in God. “In the 18th and 19th centuries, the foremost intellectuals considered atheism a *good* thing. [The Church harbored ancient superstitions and resisted scientific discoveries. Today] leading thinkers are more prone to stress the *negative* consequences of the loss of belief in God. They have seen that Nietzsche’s prophecy was correct: a world that has lost God altogether is worse than the world that believed in God.”¹

The first negative consequence of atheism is that there are **no divine restraints on human behavior**. In one of Dostoevsky’s novels, “one of his characters says, ‘If there is no God, then everything is permitted.’ [In other words, without God all standards of behavior become relative. If there is no God] all opinions about norms and values must be regarded as purely *subjective*.”² Each individual decides what is right and what is wrong. We know where that leads. People concoct stories and call them truth simply because it suits their purposes. When objective truth is damaging, they accuse others of dreaming up stories. Because people have no compunction about lying, we find ourselves in the era of Fake News.

In a world where there is no God – no rights and wrongs according to a divine mandate then anything can be justified: lying, stealing, adultery, greed, revenge, racism...anything. I may have to face the consequences of breaking the law of a country, but in a world devoid of God I have no anxiety about defying God.

The second negative consequence of atheism is **meaninglessness**. If there is no God, there is no overarching purpose for life, except for meanings we devise for ourselves. “The way we live, including the way we treat others, does not finally matter.”³ In a meaningless world, people feel empty and struggle for ways to fill the void

within. Some fill their spare time with entertainment, some over medicate to blot out their despair. Those who cannot bear pointlessness may take their own lives.

The third negative consequence of atheism is **materialism**. When human beings no longer believe in God, they still have an impulse to “live in harmony with some ultimate power or reality. Many have turned to materialism, where matter itself is thought to be the ultimate reality...The most obvious form of this is the insatiable desire to control and possess more and more material things...[It also leads to an ethic of] the survival of the fittest...unrestrained competition for the control of material resources.”⁴ We often witness it in people who are continually buying more and more stuff in the belief that happiness is just a purchase away and in government policies that ignore human and environmental costs.

Griffin calls the fourth negative consequence of atheism **militarism**. I would call it the **abuse of power**. If there is no God, and therefore, no divine standards of right and wrong, then might makes right. One can use whatever force necessary to impose one’s will on others. This is true for both individuals and nations. Discussion, negotiation, persuasion, and compromise are cast aside in favor of brute force. Nations are free to wage war in order to impose their will on other nations. Gangs are free to eliminate the members of rival gangs. Individuals are free to bully others in order to get what they want.

The fifth negative consequence of atheism is **neotribalism**. A quick survey of history “reveals the tribalistic tendencies of human beings. [Circling the wagons and gathering with *our* kind] distinguishes between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and says that the moral norms that apply among *us* do not constrain our treatment of *them*.”⁵ White Nationalists justify desecrating Jewish cemeteries. Jewish settlers justify demolishing the homes of Palestinian families. Shiites and Sunnis justify obliterating one another.

While religion has been misused to promote tribalism, believing in one God who is Creator of all there is, provides the route to overcome it. If all are created in the image of God, and if we are our brother’s keeper, and if we are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves, the flimsy stilts propping up tribalism can be toppled.

Poet and professor, Christian Wiman tells of hearing a famous novelist being interviewed on the radio about his father’s death. He “praised his father for enduring a long, difficult dying without ever ‘*seeking relief in religion.*’ The father was in absolute despair, and as the cold waters closed over him he could find nothing to hold on to but his pride. [Wiman asks] This is to be admired? That we carry our despair stoically into death? That even the utmost anguish of our lives does not change us? To say that there is nothing beyond this world that we see, to make death the final authority of our lives, is to sow a seed of meaninglessness.”⁶

Many of us learned to see life through the eyes of the modern scientific worldview based on the physics of Newton and the scientific method. This worldview claimed that the only things that are real are those that can be detected by the senses. This worldview defined the world in mechanistic categories. That is, the world was like a giant clock with a multitude of separate moving parts. God, the cosmic clockmaker, set the clock running and then retired to a far corner of the universe. This approach torpedoes a spiritual life because it eliminates those realities that cannot be seen, measured, and dissected. The theory of relativity and other discoveries in the 20th century led to a new understanding of the universe. Rather than a machine with moving parts, the universe is more like a living organism and it is far stranger than previously thought with unseen forces at work.

Religious truth—similar to poetry and music – does not necessarily contradict science. It adds another dimension to our understanding of reality. Looking at an experience rationally and analytically, gives us the height and width of reality, but spiritual insight adds depth. It can move us beyond the “what” of life to the “why” of life.

Today’s passage from the Gospel of Mark tells of an occasion not long after Jesus began his ministry. He returned to his hometown of Nazareth and on the sabbath, he stepped into the synagogue to teach. Initially, everyone’s

jaws dropped as his profound wisdom filled the air, but then their cynicism clouded their judgment. Someone said, “Isn’t this Joseph and Mary’s boy? We know his family. He is not one sent from God.”

The story serves as a parable whose message is this: It can be hard to detect God in the familiar. Our mindset makes it difficult to recognize the extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary. Belief in God is essential to the survival of civilization, but can the Church revive our sense of wonder? Can the Church help us recover the ability to recognize and experience God?

Some believe that the visible world is all there is. Do you think there is more than our eyes can perceive? Some think that only physical matter constitutes reality. Do you ever have feelings deep within your bones that there are also spiritual realities you cannot fully grasp? Some believe only in what can be conceived and explained. Do you sense that there is also mystery – powers and worlds beyond what our minds can fathom?

Some of the most powerful moments in life strain rational explanation. Perhaps you have stood at the edge of the Grand Canyon and been overwhelmed with a feeling of awe. Perhaps a piece of music struck chords deep within you and affected you in ways that words cannot express. You might have served soup to people who were hungry and then sat down and chatted with someone who was homeless, and your heart ached and your vision cleared long enough to glimpse that he was not really a stranger, but your brother.

Some never glimpse God because God does not show up where and how they desire. They yearn for a supernatural miracle that will knock their socks off, rather than the miracle of a sunrise and its promise of a new day; or, the miracle of forgiveness in the midst of extreme hatred; or detecting the whispers of God in a verse of Scripture, a poem, a parable or a prayer – whispers that shape and reshape us.

Writer Courtney Martin reminds us that not all spiritual experiences “take place in beautiful sanctuaries or sun-dappled mountain passes. Some are outrageously mundane [but they possess] transformative power. Some of them keep us connected. Some of them keep us alive.”⁷

When have you felt the presence of God? In God’s breathtaking creation? In personal prayer and reflection? When a passage of Scripture came alive for you? When an act of compassion brought you to tears?

Deep within each of us is a subtle energy that animates our soul. God’s Spirit working within our body, mind, and soul produces a yearning to connect with God’s Spirit in others, it prompts delight in the face of beauty, it encourages us to cherish loving relationships, it moves us to feel empathy for one who suffers, it sparks feelings of hope even in dark times, and it causes us to rejoice at the triumph of justice.

Poet Mary Oliver says that our “work is loving the world, which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.” In her poem entitled “Praying,” she writes:

*It doesn't have to be the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few small stones,
just pay attention, then patch a few words together
and don't try to make them elaborate, this isn't a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak.*

Most of us either rush through our day ricocheting from one activity to the next or we sleepwalk through our waking hours. Can we learn how to pay attention in order to glimpse the extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary? Can we listen for the whispers that can emerge from within? Can you, WILL you, allow your sense of wonder to break forth?

NOTES

1. David Ray Griffin, *God and Religion in the Postmodern World*, (New York: State University of New York Press: 1989), p.56.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p.57.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p.58.
6. Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), p.8 and 10.
7. Courtney E. Martin, "Spiritual Practices Hidden in Plain Sight," *OnBeing.org*, October 3, 2014.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Eternal God – who welcomes us to the table, who invites us to join the saints at the feast, who surrounds us with so great a cloud of witnesses – you are our hope and our salvation! From generation to generation, your faithfulness is sure.

You are the One who claimed our ancestors – calling upon shepherds to lead your people, anointing kings to keep your flock. You are the One who dwelled among us – sending the Word-made-flesh to heal our brokenness, pouring out grace abundant through this, your Son. You are the One who sustained the faithful of every age – inspiring teachers and disciples, seekers and priests, empowering parents and grandparents to share your love.

Generous God, by your grace, we have these gifts to share. So, with thanksgiving, we come to this table, taking our place beside saints of ages past, to share one bread and one cup – the fruit of your creation, that unites us with the faithful of every time and place.

On this All Saints' Sunday, we remember with joy the saints of our lives, who have done justice, loved kindness, and walked humbly with you, and we name them before you now ...

[Names of the saints]

We give thanks for these, your beloved children, who have joined the church triumphant, and dwell with you in your everlasting kingdom. With thanksgiving, we remember these sisters and brothers in Christ, and praise you for the gift of their lives –

for all in them that was good and kind and faithful,
for the ways they bore witness to your love.

With gratitude and anticipation, we come to this table, which is bound neither by time nor place, to join these sisters and brothers at the feast which you have prepared for us.

Gracious God, pour out your Spirit upon us and upon these gifts of bread and cup. Draw us together into one body, and join us to Christ and the communion of saints. Unite us in faith, encourage us with hope, inspire us to love, that we may serve as your faithful disciples until we feast at your table in glory.

We lift this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, and join our voices as one as we offer the prayer he taught us: **Our Father ...**