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**Series: CoExist!**

**Sermon: What Christians Can Learn from Atheists**

**Psalm 14:1-3, 7a.**

Bilious and bloated, they gas,  
    “God is gone.”  
Their words are poison gas,  
    fouling the air; they poison  
Rivers and skies;  
    thistles are their cash crop.

God sticks his head out of heaven.  
    He looks around.  
He’s looking for someone not stupid—  
    one man, even, God-expectant,  
    just one God-ready woman.

He comes up empty. A string  
    of zeros. Useless, unshepherded  
Sheep, taking turns pretending  
    to be Shepherd.  
The ninety and nine  
    follow their fellow.  
Is there anyone around to save Israel?  
    Yes. God is around; God turns life around.

**Mark 7:1-8**

The Pharisees, along with some religion scholars who had come from Jerusalem, gathered around him. They noticed that some of his disciples weren’t being careful with ritual washings before meals. The Pharisees—Jews in general, in fact—would never eat a meal without going through the motions of a ritual hand-washing, with an especially vigorous scrubbing if they had just come from the market (to say nothing of the scourings they’d give jugs and pots and pans).

The Pharisees and religion scholars asked, “Why do your disciples flout the rules, showing up at meals without washing their hands?”

Jesus answered, “Isaiah was right about frauds like you, hit the bull’s-eye in fact:

These people make a big show of saying the right thing,  
    but their heart isn’t in it.  
They act like they are worshiping me,  
    but they don’t mean it.  
They just use me as a cover  
    for teaching whatever suits their fancy,

Ditching God's command  
and taking up the latest fads."

### Sermon

It was 10 years ago, Stephanie and I started a new church. From scratch. We went door to door. We advertized. We started a Sunday School in a rented school. And after all that, after months of being on the ground, we finally put together our first worship service. 175 people came by. 80 of them stuck around. What was interesting is that we didn't steal from other churches, mostly. We had a few. But the majority of our folks were either those who had been in church, but years ago, many of them wounded by the church, and we had our share of those who were seeking. Those who didn't quite know what to believe. And even those antagonistic to the faith. And I had to once-again learn what it was like when I was seeking answers to life's persistent questions. I couldn't take it for granted that they knew what Easter was all about, let alone Pentecost, or the Lord's prayer. For many, they were starting from square one.

And so, as we go through this exercise asking ourselves what we Christians have to learn from various aspects of the surrounding culture, there is one voice that is absolutely necessary to hear: the voice of those who disagree with us most profoundly. And while some of our biggest disagreements often are with our fellow Christians, those matters are usually surface matters that have been blown out of proportion. The question of what age a person should get baptized at is a triviality and is a poor reason to sow discord among Christian. John Wesley would have considered such a question a "non-essential" and so should we.

No. If we're going to talk about the ones who disagree with us the most profoundly, it would be those who reject the entire proposition of Christianity: namely, that there's a God at all who cares about us, seeks relationship with us, and seeks our wholeness and that of the entire Creation. The voice that Christians need to hear from is the voice of the Atheist.

There are those who would no doubt argue that unbelievers have nothing to say to believers. But that is a narrow view and not consistent with Jesus' own behavior recognizing wisdom from pagans and non-believers when he encountered it, as in the case of the Samaritan woman or the Roman Centurion with the servant in need of healing.

The Christian attitude toward atheists is a difficult one. Christians tend to place a lot of emphasis on 'belief' and 'faith' and so unbelievers do not sit well with Classical Christian thought. Often people take their cue from Biblical texts like Psalm 14, Fools say in their hearts, There is no God. They are corrupt and do evil things; not one of them does anything good. Are they dumb, all these evildoers, devouring my people like they are eating bread but never calling on the LORD? Those who do not believe in God, i.e., the wicked who exploit the poor and oppress the people, are fools. They have no knowledge. They lack awareness of the reality of God and wallow in ignorance.

The only problem is this: it is not just 'fools' who say in their heart: "There is no God." Some very intelligent and thoughtful people have come to this conclusion. Say what you will about Einstein or Stephen Hawking, but they're not idiots. In thinking, then, about what we have to learn from atheists, I was tempted to start by saying that one thing we don't need to learn is a combative, smug, self-righteousness like the kind of Atheist we believe is out there. Those who mock believers. But then it occurred to me that atheists probably learned that combative, smug, self-righteous pattern of behavior from Christians in the first place. Which leads us into our first point:

Our Role: The first lesson we have to learn is that a sizeable number of atheists are atheists because they found the notion of Christianity or faith unpalatable. And do you know why they found it unpalatable? Because of us.

I remember a conversation I had many years ago with someone who I found to be antagonistic to the faith. Not just a non-believer, but someone who actually hated religious folk. I remember him saying something like “You Christians think anyone who doesn’t think like you is going to hell,” he’d say. “You think gay people are going to hell.” “You don’t believe in evolution and other things determined by science.” He was kind of surprised every time I’d respond, because I’d say, “I don’t think that way at all. I believe in evolution. I don’t think non-Christians go to hell. I don’t think LGBT people are damned...” and so on. As the conversation wore on late into the night, I tried to figure out where he’d gotten this idea about Christians. And then it became clear: he’d been raised as one of them. The church he’d gone to was full of that attitude.

But the encounter saddened me because he hadn’t come to this opinion out of malicious intent, or because he felt like being antagonistic. He had come to this opinion because he had experienced spiritual violence by people who claim the name “Christian”.

And so the first thing we have to learn is that when it comes to sharing what we believe, Christians are often our own worst enemies. We should not fault atheists for believing Christians are narrow-minded, intolerant, hateful bigots, while there are so many Christians who are narrow-minded, intolerant, hateful bigots. And some days that’s me!

When it comes to sharing faith with others, there are constructive ways that respect other people, that respect boundaries, and respect belief. And then there are ways that are belligerent, obnoxious, and as far as I can tell, utterly ineffective. Has the Westboro Baptist Church, for example, ever gotten a single convert by showing up to funerals with signs saying that God wanted the deceased to die? Has anyone in that misguided so-called church ever considered that they themselves might be the biggest barriers to anyone actually listening to what they have to say? No. And for the average person, they put a very visible, and hateful, face on Christianity.

We have to learn that that is our responsibility. It is our task to present a different face of Christian faith from the loudest voices. Our task is to present an open-minded, tolerant, inclusive, welcoming faith. This isn’t to say that doing so would convert every atheist out there, nor is that the point. But it would take responsibility for the fact that so many have been driven from Christian faith not by an outside force or temptation, but by what is wrong within.

VIDEO: Easter

Human Tradition: Another point we could learn from atheists is about the nature of religion itself. Atheists will often point out that much of religious tradition is man-made. That our rituals, our traditions, our doctrines, our structures, are the products of human creation.

Of course they are! God has no use of religions. They are all human attempts to understand the divine-human encounter. God has no religion—God is not a Jew, or a Muslim, or a Buddhist. God is not even a Methodist. These are the systems that we fashion to try to make sense out of our encounters with the divine.

And yes, the critics are right, when we become more concerned with the religions than with the realities they are meant to help us explore and understand, then all manner of woe ensues.

That is exactly what Jesus is dealing with himself in the Gospel passage we read earlier. He is questioned as to

why his disciples do not wash their hands before eating. He responds that his critics have elevated a human rule to a divine rule. And that they have a history of elevating human rules over divine rules. Our atheist friends remind us that we are all too often guilty of doing the same kind of thing. So much of what we do as a church is human tradition. That's not a bad thing: so much of what we do as human beings is human tradition: driving on the right side of the road, placing federal holidays on a Monday, firing off fireworks on the Fourth of July, having a cookout for Memorial Day. There's nothing wrong with that and the church is full of precisely those kinds of things: two candles on the altar, wearing the color green during Ordinary Time, singing during worship, and so on. But the problem is that we quickly elevate those rituals, those traditions, to the level of divine warrant. And lose all historical perspective in the process. We imagine that the way we do something or think about something is the way that we always have. And that if that be the case, then it must have come directly from God back in the beginning of time. So many of what we get bent out of shape about are our traditions that seem normal to us only because we're used to them.

It's these kinds of things—is baptism given to children, who is permitted to take the sacrament of communion, who can be ordained to the clergy—that are determined by human tradition. And as I mentioned earlier, they become the things that we fight about the most with our fellow Christians.

And what a spectacle we make of ourselves in the process. We beat each other up over such minor matters that it brings our whole faith into disrepute.

So, yes, we could use a reminder that these are human creations. We came up with the rules about the sacraments, ordination, people's roles in the church, and so on. We ought not pretend that these rules are eternal or that they trump the ones that are: to love one another, to work for justice, to be peacemakers. To serve other people without precondition. The way Jesus would have.

And Third, we can learn to have a little bit of Skepticism To question. To challenge ourselves. A healthy faith wrestles with questions. A healthy faith admits uncertainty. A healthy faith takes doubt head on and embraces it. It does not seek to cover things up with simplistic answers, but seeks to grapple. This kind of faith is a process rather than a result. And it is the kind of faith we should have.

Asking tough and uncomfortable questions is at the heart of that exercise. And should not be feared. Not because there's a ready answer at hand in case anyone asks anything too difficult, but because the tough questions are the centerpiece of faith. There is no benefit to an unthinking, mechanistic religion that tolerates no dissent, that asks no questions.

But a faith that is willing to ask questions and wrestle with them is a faith that can serve us well in a world that is often not easily understood.

For if there's one thing wrong with our country today it's that we have an excess of certainty. Our public discourse is chock full of people who are so sure of everything! They know exactly what should happen and they have a five point plan to get you there. The result: a toxic political climate and the lowest levels of civility in a generation.

But if we can incorporate asking the tough questions into a life of faith then we can help to translate that idea through a number of different areas. And who knows, perhaps open the door to a climate in which people are willing to listen to each other because they won't assume that they already know all there is to know.

In the end, the insights that we can take from our friends and neighbors who don't believe can actually

strengthen our faith, rather than weaken it. Taking ownership of our faith's history of spiritual violence, being mindful of the human element in religion, and adopting a critical, thinking attitude toward faith, willing to embrace doubt and uncertainty, is helps us to live out a faith that is more open, more authentic, and that more truly reveals God to the world.

Am I an atheist? Of course not. As far as I know, I never was. I've always had faith of some kind. And it ebbs and flows as I get older, more experience, more knowledge. But I have faith in a God who loves me. In a Savior who redeems me. In a Spirit that guides me. This morning, if you've got questions - that's great. So do I. But I want you to know that you are loved by God. If you've been hurt by the church, I'm sorry that you had that. Don't let the church, with all of it's imperfections get in the way of your faith. It's like saying, I don't believe in education because I had a bad school. That don't make no sense. But this morning, if God is tugging on your heart, answer that call. You don't have to have all of the answers. We don't. But take that step of faith and believe that you matter to Him. And you have a family to belong to.

Go Into Communion.