

IF GOD DOES NOT EXIST

Texts on Sunday, November 8, 2009

Genesis 1: 1-5 and John 1: 1-5

Søren Kierkegaard told a parable about this peculiar event we're in right here, right now—a sermon. The gist of it is that ordinarily you suppose that in this show, the preacher is the performer and you are the audience. But no! the parable concludes. In this play, the preacher is only a prompter. *You* are the actors and the audience—that is God. So how are you doing? (Notes!)

In the beginning, as we create our relationship, I want to lay out my understanding of a sermon's function. I do not intend mine to be diverting and entertaining. I intend to help you with the performance of your lives, and mine also, for I only preach what I myself first need to hear, maybe more than you do. I aim for your open mind and for your open heart.

With respect to your mind, I ask for hard thought. Not fancy thought and not laced with fancy words—but hard, like strong hikers prepared for hard terrain beyond the familiar woods. Let us think a thing through wherever it goes, for clear thought is the first requirement of freedom. A good teacher does not aim to make you think what she thinks. A good teacher shines light on the path of thought so you can see how she goes, and, if necessary, where you part ways. That's freedom. That's light. That's why, on the first day, God says Let there be light. May God help me aim for more light.

But strong, clear thought, cut off from the heart, is a power trip—"a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal—a nothing," in the words of the apostle Paul. The great power of Western thought as well as its tragic consequences arise from one pattern, that Promethean struggle to know objectively, to have knowledge without love for what is known. No knowledge is worthy to be called truth unless the heart is its companion. And no one ever really changed deep down where it lasts except his heart moved him. So I intend that our sermons embrace your open mind and your open heart.

Today I want to begin in the beginning. Let us think about the nature of God, for if we don't have that right, what is worship? Over the last several years, a handful of writers have made a great deal of money from books challenging the existence of God. I am thinking of Sam Harris and of Christopher Hitchens' *God is not great* and of Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*. Their tone is angry, offended, and offensive and their thesis is simple: Reason is adequate to explain the world. Supernaturalism need not apply.

Well, to a large degree, I agree. I have written and lectured a good deal in response to these so-called "new atheists," and I usually begin with a brief catalogue of major points on which atheists and persons of faith can agree. We'll leave that summary for another time, but here is a biographical note with which some of you may identify. At fourteen, I abandoned belief in God for a vibrant, committed atheism, whose truth I pursued for some time. But at twenty, my reading of the great theologian Paul Tillich dismantled my atheism. I did not then become a Christian, but I saw that my atheism was premised on weak thought.

Now, it happens that all of the authors of these books we have just referenced experienced in adolescence a suffocating, moralistic religion, and soon abandoned it for the fresh breezes of reason. Therefore, they never had an adult experience of religious consciousness. Assuming that all religion is like what they left behind, they literally don't know what they're talking about. They as well as many Christians fail to see that intellectual development—strengthening the power to think—is a necessary process in spiritual development; and that abandoning childish belief in a God of magic powers—and abandoning churches that keep trying to spoon feed adults mashed peas from a bottle—is a sign of spiritual health. "When I was a child, I thought like a child," says the apostle, "but when I became a man I put away childish things." Well, you and me too, baby.

So, does God exist? That is the question that vexes so many, whether atheist or believer. I say no, God does not exist—and that almost all the unhappy struggle of believing in and not believing is rooted in the intellectual error that God exists in a sphere of reality separate from God's creation.

Does God exist? Forget how to answer for a moment and see instead how peculiar the question is. To inquire into the existence of a thing, the questioner must stand outside that thing to gather information and make a judgment. Do germs exist? Get a microscope. Do planets exist in other solar systems? Get a telescope and get far from the bright lights and the big city. Does God exist? Get a . . . What? Stand where? The ancient root of the word "exist" comes from two words, "to stand . . . out." (εξ - ἵστημι) To stand out from a field or background. To be this, but not that—to have being. But if "in the beginning, God created all things," then God does not *have* being. God does not stand out from other beings. God *is* being—the ground of being, as Tillich famously put it. "In God we live and move and have *our* being," affirms the apostle Paul. You exist. I exist. Candles, refrigerators, dogs, and ideas exist. But not God. God is. God is in all things.

And if we affirm that in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God, then we try out what it might mean to say Christ also does not exist; that is, does not stand out from God, but “all things come into being through the Word.” *Everything* is infused with the Spirit of unity—of love—you meet in the image of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. Does God exist? It’s a question that simply does not compute. There is no place to stand outside of God to toss the dart or see if it hits its mark. God does *not* exist. God is. By Christ’s death and rising, God sends the Word of life into you: *I do not exist apart from you. I am in you and you in me. You’re pregnant with the divine life.* So, are you going to go through with it?

How might language like this matter? If God does not exist—from the human point of view—as an object for you to make judgments about, then you are released from the task of knowing about God, yea or nay, into the project of knowing God and loving God’s creation. Though it is plain that we never can fully know even one human being, so vast and hidden is the inwardness of human being, still sometimes we really do love another fully. Love can be full, knowledge not. So also with God who is in all things: our love of God in all things can sometimes be full, though knowledge never. Leave off, then, that strained, proud effort to stand off and see God, outstanding in his field. He’s not there/She’s not there—but here, Emmanuel, God-with-us, already come down.

Affirm this and you, with all creation, sing praise and thanksgiving for what is—not for what you wished for. No: for what is. “Prayer,” writes Brother David Stendl-Rost, “is a quality of attention so present to what is given that it appears as a gift.” If God does not exist, but God is, see what becomes of our innumerable divisions and exploitations. Is not God alive and moving in all religious searching and feeling after God? Where is the field of battle with lovers of God whose practice and language differ—with Jew or Muslim or Buddhist? When you put on the mind of Christ, which is learner’s mind, where is the battle with the spirit of atheism pursuing truth? Nowhere. God moves in all things. I don’t mean “directly intends all things”—but rather, God freely moves in all things. Once affirm that not one thing comes into being without God’s Word, and all this unhappy struggle over who is right and who is wrong gives way to the holy, inner struggle for God, which Islam calls *jihad*. If all things are one in God, is it not in the night of your loss and your solitude where you can become present to the One? We do not say that God designs your calamity—a cancer, a uselessness, an untimely widowhood, a mind gone traceless down alleys. Rather, in Christ we

affirm that you—*my Word is for you, says the Lord*—that you, existing, come alive now in the presence of the One, on the first day. Let there be light!

This week, Bill Moyers’ Journal on PBS screened a documentary, *The Good Soldier*, released for the Veterans Day memorial. The film brings us inside the lives of four men from different generations who went to war and whose personalities were consumed by the indiscriminate killing which is war and evil. Now, as I was watching, I thought about my theme for this sermon. I felt an uneasy tension between my warm words and war’s violence. I let an apprehension for the unfathomable tragedy of endless killing seep all over this lovely sermon theme, to try it and stain it wet with memory of more blood and sorrow than I have known—though in Jesus, has not this testing of our theme already been finished? Still, it is not right to mouth candies about God—that God’s in his heaven and all’s right with the world. It is not so. But if God does not exist, God’s not in heaven. That is not the theme.

Each of those four men speaks of being drawn down by war into an addicting thrill for its hate-filled hunt and killing. Is this one reason why soldiers are silent about their service? These four descended into hell. But each of them came back. Not all do, we know, and we owe all vets every care. But each of these hungered for the light of his humanity. Today, each sets his shoulder to the plow to break the hard, dry ground in this nation’s mind to plant seeds of peace for the dawn when we will lay down our sword and shield, down by the riverside, and study war no more. What is this power and possibility released in them and in all things? In this place, we call this movement God. And if in the story of Jesus’ hideous murder and unexpected life, we have ourselves come alive to the everywhere movement of God’s Word, then we can say with the evangelist that “in him is life, and the life is the light of humanity. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.”

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