

With the Love of God in our Hearts

3-24-13 (Palm Sunday)

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So... I recently became friends with a staunch atheist.

This isn't too unusual for me.

I've shared with you a few times before that most of my friends are atheist or agnostic.

Of course, this isn't some kind of weird preference for me.

Just sort of happens that way.

It's a sad fact that most people these days don't know God.

And because they haven't met God, yet, themselves, they just doubt that God exists.

It's kind of like when someone says

they have a girlfriend or boyfriend living in a different country, right?

(Know what I'm talking about?)

...Someone who they talk with and talk about all of the time,

but their friends have never met them or seen them, themselves.

And after months, or even years of talking about them,

and their love together, people start to wonder if their friend is just making it all up,

or if they're just ragingly desperate to have their friends

believe they have some companionship,

when they're really just sad and alone.

Anyway... it's kind of the same way when you have a relationship with God.

Past all of that, coming back to actual atheism,
and bringing us back to the real stuff...

Because most people haven't opened their thoughts or hearts
to experience that Presence of Life,

All they see of God is what we say about God.

---But worse, and more exactly, what *religion* says of God, and does in the name of God.

And though God is beautiful and reliable,
and more real and constant than any of the transitional matter
we see come and go in front of our eyes,

Religion... well, that's a different story.

Religion is often unreliable, because just like our houses, and cars, and microwaves,

It's manmade. It's a set of rituals and customs *we* created as a way to try to better reach
God.

God is perfect. Religion is not.

And people who haven't yet met God for themselves,
so mistakenly equate *religion* with God,

And so they accidentally see God as a temporary thing.

A transitional *idea* that will pass away. A faulty thing. A false thing.

This is the majority of people's experience of God,

and that's why most of the people I know are atheists.

And this is the heart of the challenge we face as people who love God, and feel God, when we try to express that fact in a very bitter, skeptical world.

I usually like being in touch with people in doubt...

But this new atheist acquaintance of mine... well,

he was a bit different from the other nonbelievers I enjoy spending time with.

This person was fanatical about it. Adamant about it. Angry about it.

He's what I call a proselytizing atheist.

That word is a mouthful, and one people in religious studies are pretty well familiar with,

But if you haven't been exposed to the word yet yourself,

I'll quickly explain it a little bit:

There are certain religions known as proselytizing religions...

...and that means the people who are a part of that belief, feel a drive---

---A *need*. And in fact a *CALL* to spread their beliefs to others.

Not all religions do this... Judaism, for example.

It's not a part of the Jewish creed to spread Judaism and convert people to Judaism.

But Christianity is a proselytizing religion. Islam is a proselytizing religion.

And as much as atheists deny it, their non-belief is actually classified as a "religion," too, by academic religious scholars.

A some atheists take it to the extreme of turning their beliefs about *not* believing in God,
Into a proselytizing practice, too.

And this guy was one of those.

At first our conversations were great---they were healthy.

Like most I'd had with other nonbelievers.

I don't believe in pushing my beliefs down people's throats.

But I'll share my thoughts on God until I die in my chair, if someone asks me...

...And with neither of us trying to force conversion on the other,

we found we actually did agree on most points,

And at moments, I sometimes even felt that sense of God pass between the space.

Saw a softening in the face and eyes. A lessening of the hostility. Some smiles.

But a couple months into our dialogues, this friend of mine

was no longer able to hold back his own hopes to proselytize. To Convert.

I think he kind of egotistically thought just a wee bit too much

of the certainty of his stance,

and imagined it would be a wonderful victory for atheism

to convert a pastor to the religion of disbelief.

And at that point in our conversation, I was faced with a choice. An ultimatum....

Now, I'll get back to what happened in the moment following...

But that choice, that ultimatum,

I'm sure many of you have faced yourselves...

...and it existed just as powerfully for Jesus, for his disciples, and all who followed after.

This Sunday is Palm Sunday. A day to celebrate these things.

To celebrate these challenges, and the ways we face them

and confront them as we walk through life with God.

As a united church, we've been asked to consider the following, together, this morning:

After the initial joy of Jesus coming into Jerusalem like a king, fickleness of heart and betrayal are the themes of the day. Shortly after singing Jesus' praises as he rode a colt into the holy city, the crowds and even his disciples betrayed and denied him. To avoid moving from the joy of Palm Sunday to the joy of Easter without moving through the anguish of Holy Thursday and Good Friday, this Sunday's service focuses on the all-too-human trait of falling away when we should be following faithfully.

Now, we read through the scripture about Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem

in two different moments, today.

For our Call to Worship, *and* for our gospel reading,

so I won't read through it again.

But we saw there Jesus' humbly glorious procession into Jerusalem,

Which we talked about last year, revealing that this wasn't just an act on its own.

It was a peaceful protest against the procession of Pontius Pilate,

entering the city on the exact opposite side,

With all of the grandeur of well bred horses,

parades of glimmering gold, and powerful soldiers.

While Pilate did this to show off the strength of Rome, Jesus came in on the other side,

On a colt. In an act of passive resistance...in a display of the simple glory of God.

A very bold and dangerous move on his part.

And one that was received so openly and gladly by the people of Jerusalem, they waved palms and laid their cloaks over the dirt while he moved ahead.

Jesus was loved and praised and shouted after

with deeply felt passion on the part of all watching.

People shouting out so loudly about the glory of God.

...But we all know what happened only very shortly after.

This moment when Jesus was received and loved so fervently by the masses, is described in chapter 19 of the gospel of Luke.

Only 3 chapters later... in chapter 22....

What's described as happening to Jesus is so vastly different.

All of those crowds who loved him. And even those closest to him, who followed him---his own disciples---turn against him.

From Luke, Chapter 22:

During the Last Supper, after Jesus passes the bread and wine, he says:

21 But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. 22 For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!" 23 Then they began to ask one another, which one of them it could be, who would do this.

This person was Judas.

Some scholars have speculated that Judas and Jesus were actually quite close.

The Gospel of Judas, a papyrus codex recently found in Egypt, in the 1970s---

---one apparently well read in the early church---

---describes Judas and Jesus as being even the best of friends.

...Take it for what it's worth... But either way...

Judas, a disciple, is the first to turn his back on God,

and all he'd learned from following Christ.

Later in Chapter 22, verse 31... this turning comes again from unexpected places of deep loyalty.

Jesus says to Peter, just a moment later...

31 "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, 32 but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, *when once you have turned back*, strengthen your brothers." 33 And he said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!" 34 Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me."

Later:

47 While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; 48 but Jesus said to him, "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?"

Just after this:

54 Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. 55 When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. 56 Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man also was with him." 57 But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." 58 A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" 59 Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean." 60 But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. 61 The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." 62 And he went out and wept bitterly.

All of this comes together for us, today, on Palm Sunday.

You see, so often we're so fervently caught up in our love of God.

Especially when things are going well.

Especially when we're surrounded by people who feel the same way.

Our palms can be raised high. Our cloaks gladly thrown to the floor.

It's easy to love God and hold onto God when things are just right.

When we can laugh and smile with each other in safe places.

But where do we stand in God's soul when things go wrong?

How tightly do we hold on, when circumstances make it easier---

--more convenient----safer---to turn away?

This is a tough question we all have to ask ourselves as followers of God.

No matter how close we are in relationship with God.

Because this drifting, this running, this denial of God can be so easy for us to fall into.

It's happened to the best and most devoted of God's chosen.

God chooses us always; and as we move along in our journey,

we need to be mindful of how often *we* choose *God*.

And we should be careful. Stay sharp in here [head] and soft in here [heart].

Because requests to turn away can come from the most unexpected of places.

Even from the kind face of an acquaintance, smiling at you from across a table.

We're asked, at the most unexpected of moments---

---as casual as one shared staring over a Chili's menu!---

---to choose to stay close with God at great risk, leaving yourself open and vulnerable;

or to deny God---shut God out---for the sake of false safety, and wander away.

And that's exactly when this happened most recently in my own experience,

---when I told you about these conversations with the staunch, proselytizing atheist...

Happens to us all a lot at different times.

But this was the most recent, and the most *blatant*, for me.

In that moment across a cobb salad, I was faced with that choice. That ultimatum.

At one point, the healthy dialogue between us stopped. His face grew firm.

There was no longer a space of sharing, but of telling.

And I'm serious...this might sound too extreme to be true, but sadly, that's not the case...

He said to me, "You should stop holding onto superstitious fear.

Quit your job, because it only leads people into the lie of God, and a sense of false hope."

"You're obviously an intelligent person," he went on.

"You shouldn't let yourself be trapped in all of that stuff... putting yourself out there, and sacrificing a salary for nothing. Come work for me.

I guarantee you'll make more money."

And here's the final kicker...

He says to me, "You're only *not* doing that now, out of religious guilt.

You're afraid. ...You should stop believing in God."

I mean, really... the only thing the moment was missing was a black robe, long twiddling fingers, and a maniacal laugh!

Drastic! It was a complete, full-fledged affront to my work, my beliefs, my standing with people, and my overall experience of life!

I've had some very candid conversations before with people, never losing my calm.
Talked about stuff with people that would make a lot of Christians cry and run away.
Don't mean to pat myself on the back for that one, but it's just the case.
I *like* when people try to be offensive,
because it usually means the meat of the conversation is thick and rare!
But this--- wow. This was a first, for me.
He used direct words that would stab deep into the heart of any believer.
Playing on vulnerability.
Feeding into doubt and our basic human need for safety... for surety.
And I can only imagine that these were the very thoughts and fears
rampantly ripping through the disciples heads as they ran away,
that night not too long after the Palm Procession into Jerusalem.
That moment the disciples saw there was a very real danger in front of them,
for following after God.
For being known as disciples of Christ.
Knowing that they were vulnerable, and exposed,
to the massive crowd who just a little while ago praised Jesus,
and now yelled after him to be crucified.
It had to be similar to the thoughts Peter struggled with
when he was sitting across that fire, and the woman recognized him for who he was,
And all of the strength inside of him vanished as he denied Jesus---
---against all of his persistence about loyalty---and fled. For the sake of staying safe.

Now, it was a different situation for Peter.

This atheist guy didn't have the equivalent of a knife to my throat.

I didn't need to worry about being strung up on a cross, next to my teacher, to die.

The pressure was a bit more intense for Peter,

than it was for me sitting across that table at Chili's.

So I'm in no way saying that my deciding not to run from God

in that moment was in heroic contrast to Peter's choosing to flee.

But what I'm saying is, it's the place of a friend of God, of a companion of God,

To be challenged in very difficult ways when sharing about our relationship with God.

Being in love with God has so many risks, makes us vulnerable to opposing faces...

And we all face varying degrees of those challenges

as we walk from place to place, day to day.

And we respond to the choices laid in front of us with either the decision to stay with God, or to go.

Now, at this moment in what had stopped being a conversation,

and had turned into an ultimatum,

I at first sat stunned.

Quite frankly, I think it takes some brass to say something like that to a minister, regardless of your belief in disbelief.

So I had to process that for a moment.

And I also knew there was no point in going on a theological tangent with the guy.

We'd spoken at length, already,---for months---about different theologies,

and thoughts on contemporary religious issues, and all of that interesting stuff.

...And in most of those conversations,
he was in agreement with my ideas, open to my thoughts,
Often expressing the fact that if that was the way most Christians felt,
then he wouldn't be so hostile toward the belief.
So there was really nothing more to be said on that level.

But regardless of all of that previously intense, and in depth, and agreeable exchange,
he shockingly still presented me with this *choice* to stop believing in God,
and go off on my own, right there at that restaurant.

But you see...the funny thing is...

... and this is something an atheist can never understand, without ceasing to be as they are...

...When you actually *know* God... you're no longer dealing with *belief*.

There *is* no *choice* over whether or not to *think* God is either real or false.

...It's no longer an *idea* that can be changed by any well ordered argument.

Once you've met God, you understand that God is just *there*.

You feel God. You hear God. God moves you, and moves with you.

God is not an *idea*...but a reality.

---A Someone, or Something, that once you know,

no *words* can ever make you suddenly imagine God no longer *is*.

God can't just vanish with a thought.

It would be like someone trying to tell me Debbie doesn't exist,

just because they've never seen her..

...So there is no choice involved, *there*.

After you know God, sure, you can choose to *run* from God;

You can try to shut yourself down from connecting with God...

but running from God is literally getting it into your head

that you can somehow escape or leave the universe.

There is nowhere you can go to be away from It.

It's everywhere, always.

When we run from God, we're simply moving from one place in God's soul, to another...

...Hiding our eyes from the reality of the life all around us.

And until you know God, you don't understand that being with God,

loving God, holding onto God,

Is in no way itself a form of hiding in a false sense of safety...

but the opposite.

It's finally having the courage and strength to accept the life around us as fully as we can,

opening as wide as we're able, our small human minds,

and exposing the soft flesh of our breakable human hearts,

to the fact there's something bigger than what we can see or fully understand, or control;

and embracing that fact with love and awe.

It's finally standing up straight from the crunched ball of cowering,

and making ourselves open to experiencing the mystery of life without fear.

I said some of this across that table,

before leaving that person and his offer to deny God, in my past.

And turning around to walk back home with God.

To keep talking with Life, and sharing what I've heard.

To come back up here with this lame-looking robe,

grateful for making whatever I make,

And even more grateful for the gift of getting to share with you

the inexpressible blessing I've been given,

In having the chance to feel, and see, and hear God through each day of my life.

This Palm Sunday, as we sit together in this sanctuary---

---this safe place---praising God.

Let's open ourselves to proceed with the courage of Christ through the crowd.

And let's remember that whether we deny God, or hold tight,

God is always with us.

Either gladly speaking to us, and guiding us,

Or waiting for our mind's return.

As we're each faced, in our own ways,

in different discussions and moments that test our love and commitment to God,

Let's remember Simon-Peter. Who showed us this forever-connection so well.

Who showed us that even when we hide away, we're still with God.

Let's remember this disciple

who returned from wherever he ran in God's soul to rise up straight,

And become the rock upon which this Christian church now stands.

In the face of all of the skepticism and criticism yelling so loudly from the crowd around us,

As we move toward Easter, let's have the courage to stand firm in our faith---

---our knowing God....

...With the strength of God's love in our hearts, accepting whatever might come...

... and knowing the worth and beauty of the new life we've found inside of ourselves,

In knowing the company, and love, and friendship of God in our souls forever.

Amen.