

Sermon 051318 Religion
Scripture- Luke 24: 36-48
Sermon Title- Illusion and Fantasy

Since I became a minister, there have been moments and conversations that have stuck with me. I'd like to tell you about one of those conversations. This was maybe ten years ago. It was with a young man whom I'd known and liked for years. I knew him before I was ordained and at the time, he was a junior in college. He asked me if we could talk when he was home on Spring break. We met at a coffee shop.

It didn't take him long to get to his point. He said that he wanted me to know that he no longer considers himself a Christian. I said, "That's interesting, why?" He said, "I grew up believing that God created people. That is what I was taught. But now I have come to the conviction that it is the other way around- people have created God. In my judgment, religion is nothing but fantasy and illusion. People believe what they want to believe. They make their beliefs out of their desires. I don't want to insult you, but I think religion is a game of make-believe and I can no longer participate in the fantasy."

I think he may have been a little surprised when I didn't cry, puke, or fly into a rage. I said that his charge did not surprise me, that those sorts of charges that he was leveling had been around for centuries and that I myself had some of the same views, struggles and questions in my

life, and in fact I had them when *I* was in college lo so many years ago. I thought about what an interesting enterprise a college education is.

Anyway, he is studying psychology, which was my major as an undergrad. He had read the father of psychology, Sigmund Freud's famous work on religion, *The Future of Illusion*. Freud, by the way, was an atheist. Freud considered all notions of God as illusions or cosmic projections of the mind. He thought that they grew out of the infantile desire that the universe exists for one's own benefit. Freud thought that any belief in God is avoidance of reality.

My young friend had also read works by Marx, (Karl, not Groucho) another famous atheist. Marx called religion, "the opiate of the masses." Marx called religion the "pie in the sky, by and by" that keeps the masses quiet while they serve their capitalist masters. He had also looked at the great American playwright Eugene O'Neil's work. A major O'Neil theme is that illusion is the only thing that makes life bearable, and that religion is the foremost illusion of all. An O'Neil character states, "Religion is nothing but a chloroform mask into which the weak and unhappy stick their faces." Chloroform was used as an anesthetic back in O'Neil's day.

I must admit that listening to him build his case echoed my own college days of questioning in haunting ways. At some level, it tickled me to have some of these same questions coming to me now.

I said that the notion of people creating God in their image rather than God creating people in God's image has been around for a long time and it is no small issue. If that is true, if it is the case, it undermines the validity of all religious experience. It would mean that religion has no basis in reality, and is therefore invalid. I told him that I do believe that there are responses, however. The first thing I did was buy us both refills of our coffee.

Then to start my response, I made a distinction between religion and spirituality. I said that his assertions are dead on correct, in my view, with people who like to say, "I'm spiritual but not I do not believe in organized religion." There are, I pointed out, an infinite number of experiences that people describe as spiritual. People constantly escape the harsh world of actuality in order to visit the realm of fantasy. This is true of people who think of themselves as religious and those who think of themselves as spiritual and those who think of themselves as neither. There are imaginings that make you feel connected with nature in beautiful ways, or other people- even through history, or some energy force that you feel part of, any number of thoughts that take you out of the mundane. These escapist flights bring one to pleasurable or even ecstatic places. People dwell on what we wish to be true over what is reality, and then sanctify it in the name of spirituality. I told my young friend that his charge rings true for the vast canopy of these human experiences that fit under the rubric of 'spiritual.'

I went on to say, “However, speaking as a Christian minister, religious experiences that grow out of the biblical tradition- and I’m speaking specifically of my religion, Christianity- I honestly cannot see your devastating charge holding water.”

I asked him to look carefully at the central figure in this religious system, specifically the teachings and life of Jesus of Nazareth. I asked him if you look at that person and how he lived his life- do you get the impression that he was using religion as a retreat from reality? Do you think Jesus was making up a concept of God in order to escape the hardships of life? The truth is the exact opposite. Jesus’ troubles did not create his religion- his religion created his troubles.

Instead of being fantasy, a way of ease and comfort, Jesus’ vision of God thrust him into conflict with his culture. His relationship with God made his life harder, not easier. Look at his act of cleansing the temple. His commitment to God caused him to challenge the culture that he lived in- that had lost its way. Look at the passages about his time in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus cried, “Father, pass this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done.” (Mk 14: 36) Does that sound like a religion of fantasy, of wishful thinking?

I mentioned today’s gospel reading. It is the post-resurrection story of Jesus appearing to his disciples by returning from the dead. They were startled. The gospel of Luke says that they were terrified. If their mind set were a result of religion being fantasy, they would have

embraced his appearance at first sight. They were confused and afraid. That does not sound like a comforting spiritual fantasy.

What was true of Jesus is also true of what he taught. Not only that, it is true for the people who follow him. There has been martyrdom, persecution, oppression, and discrimination of Christians throughout history and some of it still exists in the world today. Look at me- do you think that if I made up a religion that would be an ‘opiate,’ a nice fantasy to make my life easier, it would be Christianity? I can tell you that my happy fantasy religion, my ‘way out of reality’ religion would not have me loving my enemies, or forgiving seventy times seven, or denying myself, or helping the needy, or loving my neighbor as myself. My fantasy religion would be a selfish religion, where I am served and I do not serve, the exact opposite of my Christian religion. To write Christianity off as nothing but weak and unhappy people sticking their faces into anesthetic masks is to close one’s eyes to the facts.

The charge of religious illusion is leveled because religion tries to understand the un-understandable. We know we cannot grasp the fullness of God yet we repeatedly go there. That makes the religious fantasy charge easy to level. Yet, it is equally impossible for atheists to prove that God does not exist as it is for people of faith to prove that God does exist.

I told him that while he's in college, he'd probably read more brilliant authors like Nietzsche and Camus who take on religion, too, or even the many scientists who think that religion and science are choices, an either-or proposition. I suggested that he read those authors with an open mind like he read the authors that he told me about. I encouraged him to explore, to think, to struggle with the big questions of life. Eventually, he will sort out what life is about and what it all means.

But then I said something to my young friend that I don't think he was expecting. I told him that I think it is the atheists who are delusional and live in fantasy worlds. I asked, "Do they really think that the material world, the really-real is all that there is?" I cannot imagine living life without a sense of wonder, mystery, and awe. How can someone think that everything is explainable and understandable, or would even want to understand it all? What about the moral and ethical lessons that we get from religion? Do atheists reject those, too? Have atheists not eaten the forbidden fruit, not learned the knowledge of good and evil? To live this life with no sense of being part of something vast and wondrous and unfathomable, to have no sense that there is purpose to life is tragic.

To have faith is to accept that there is a horizon of your understanding but that there is so much beyond that horizon and to be thankful for that. To be a person of faith is to accept that you are not in control and that you humbly admit that you need help. To be a person of

faith is to draw on strength that you know that you are not the source of. And that is where hope comes in. It is out of faith that hope is born. Hope is life defining and life sustaining.

The choice is simple, to dwell with the atheists and their cold and tragic view of the world where the future looks like more of the same old dreary past. Or to see the world as a world where God is. A world in which miracles can and do happen. A world with God is a world with hope. What world do you want to live in? AMEN