

“The Heart Has its Reasons”

I'd love to stand at the door on a Sunday morning and ask each person as they come through one question: “Why are you here?” I would imagine that no two answers would be the same. Each of us would have our own reasons. Some of us are programmed to be here, especially if we were brought up in the Catholic tradition. Some are here by convention; some are here by conviction.

Last Sunday a woman came up to me after the 11:00 a.m. service and asked where the program was on the meaning of God. I told her that she just missed Gary's sermon on “Einstein's God,” thinking that's what she had meant. It turned out that she was here for a program on “The Faith Between Us,” the title of a book by two men. The subtitle of the book is A Jew and a Christian Search for the Meaning of God.

I liked the idea of two men from different religious traditions who came to an understanding of their own faith in relationship with each other. This might be what our congregation is about, encouraging one another to explore the faith between us.

Truth is not contained in any one tradition or institution. Truth is both one and many at the same time. Each of us is called to live out our own sliver of the truth; each of us is struggling to know and live out that small piece of the truth.

The other day over lunch, a member of our congregation said that he couldn't understand why believers and non-believers got equal time in our pulpit. He meant it as a criticism and I took it as a compliment. My friend went on to question why non-believers even came to church. I could think of a number of reasons, everything from community, the indispensable matrix of enlightenment, to reverence for the mystery of life and the interconnected web of being.

Whether or not what this member said was true about non-believers getting equal time, by his own admission he only attends church once every three months, still I felt the critique was a positive one. You could say that our Society is providing an alternative to what in our present culture is called the “God Wars.”

The titles of several aggressively atheist authors attest to a kind of warfare that is going on in relation to the issue of God and religion. There is Christopher Hitchens, a journalist and professional provocateur who wrote *God is Not Great*, about how religion poisons everything. Sam Harris writes his manifesto, “There is No God (and you know it).” Then there's Richard Dawkins who authored *The God Delusion*, declaring religion a virus.

I congratulate the atheists among us for exposing yourselves to this virus. I'm also grateful for your honesty and presence. As I've often said, I believe that atheism acts as a catharsis, a purifier of inauthentic religion, a belief system that hasn't been questioned and examined, a system in which adherents have abdicated their responsibility for their

own spiritual lives to religious authorities. Atheism serves the role of keeping religion self-critical and honest.

Last Tuesday, I spent two hours in a circle of Small Group Ministry members. We meet twice a month. The topic was God, finding images or words for God, addressing the question of whether or not an image or word for the Divine was even important to us. People spoke from their own experience. The group represented the entire spectrum of belief and non-belief. We were evenly divided three and three. There was no declaration of war, no aggressive tone. Everyone spoke from the heart; no one interrupted or argued. It was challenging, edifying and energizing!

In the process, I learned from a member who had read Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*, that Dawkins was highly critical of Pascal's wager. I have not read *the God Delusion* and since I had only planned to use Pascal's thesis very selectively, I'll proceed with apologies to Dawkins.

The life of this very influential 17th century French mathematician and philosopher has always intrigued me. Blaise Pascal helped to lay the foundations for the theory of probability. He was home schooled by his father Etienne who did not want Blaise to study math before the age of 15. All math texts were removed from his home which made Blaise all the more curious about the forbidden subject. At the age of 12, he began to work on geometry himself. When his father discovered that he had figured out that the sum of the angles of a triangle are two right angles, he allowed Blaise a copy of *Euclid*. This allowance paid off when the son invented a digital calculator to help his father with his work collecting taxes. It resembled a calculator of the 1940s.

A scientific genius, Pascal was a philosophical genius as well. What I appreciate most about him is that in an age of reason he did not take a strictly rational approach in theorizing about the existence of God. No amount of evidence could compel a person to believe in God. There would always be a margin of ambiguity. In an attempt to appeal to the gambler instinct, he proposed a wager. A person was free to place a bet on the existence or nonexistence of God. In the context of Pascal's life and times—dramatically different from our own—he thought that it was a better “bet” to believe in the existence of God than not to believe because the expected value of believing is always greater than the expected value of not believing. In his judgment, he felt that it was inexcusable not to at least investigate the issue. In his *Pensees*, his unfinished and most famous work, he wrote: “To deny, to believe, and to doubt well are to a person as the race is to a horse.” One of his better known thoughts is: “The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing.” That could be one response to the question that I posed in the beginning, the one I'd like to ask people coming through our door on a Sunday morning. Our motivation is most often multi-leveled, involving heart and mind, subjectivity and objectivity.

During our Small Group Ministry sessions we often use significant quotations from a variety of sources to stimulate discussion. This past Tuesday, a quotation from the African-American author James Baldwin reminded me of Pascal's wager, an updated

21st century, enlightened pro-choice version of the gamble. Baldwin says: "If the concept of God has any validity or use it can only be to make us larger, freer, more loving. If God (or our concept of her) cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of her."

Baldwin's words challenge us to investigate how useful the object or subject of our faith is. Does what or who we believe in make us larger, freer, more loving? Is it a faith that encourages us to live fully and die well? That was the title of a program offered here last fall. Stephen Kiernan was a guest speaker in that program. It is a joy to have him back with us.