Sunday, July 9, 1978
WHAT CAN YOU SAY TO AN ATHEIST?
Luke 11:9-13

From time to time I meet people, as do you, who tell me that they do not believe in God. Some individuals who make this statement have just experienced a horrible tragedy and are angry with all of life. Others are bitter and unforgiving because of an experience years ago. And still others who say they don't believe in God have been brought up with an outlook on life which is based on the pursuit of success conceived in terms of things that can be seen and possessed. They seem to believe that only material is real or worth working for, and the things of the spirit are neglected or thought to be false and misleading.

Then too there are some who make the statement of disbelief in God who are really now discarding their child-hood concept of God and have not yet found an adequate belief in God to take its place. There are also those who consider themselves atheists as the result of a sincere doubting, skeptical and searching mind and they are still on their search. There are some too, who have been turned off by the church for one reason or another and are therefore also turned off on the idea or belief in God.

Some people no doubt have come into close contact with other persons who claim to be believers in God and intimate with God and then the atheist has come to the conclusion that if that's what a God-believer is like, he or she wants no part of it. There are persons who claim to be God's intimates who show more bigotry and pride than they do godliness.

What then can you say to an atheist? What you say of course will depend partly on the reason a person claims to be an atheist. But no matter what the reason, here are some tactical suggestions.

First, it does no good to argue with an atheist. No person can really be argued into believing. Rather listen carefully to the person who says he or she doesn't believe in God. Hear their story. Try to understand their doubts. Pay close attention. Listen actively.

2. You can admit that often organized religion in attempting to represent God has made and still makes some tragic errors. Believers in God are not necessarily less hypocritical than non-believers. The church is also a human institution and as such subject to many of the same distortions and mistakes as other human institutions.

3. Third, you can ask the non-believer in God what kind of God he or she does not believe in. Often a person is rejecting an inadequate or false concept of God, the kind of God you don't believe in either.

But in addition to these tactical suggestions, there are some other approaches to the atheist or non-believer which can speak to him or her on a deeper level.

1. First, you can acknowledge your kinship with him or her. You might say for example, "I know who you are. I know what you are going through because I've had a similar experience. Faith is always in tension with doubt."

All of us have sincere doubts from time to time, the kind of doubt that is always a part of the search for truth. Genuine doubt is the reverse side of genuine faith. Doubt means we are

taking God seriously — it's a wrestling with God. Just as· genuine faith is not mere intellectual assent, but trust in ultimate reality, so genuine doubt is the fear that evil and despair may have the last word. Doubt comes to us because from our perspective, life is often unfair. Tragedies occur for which there is no adequate explanation. Life and the universe are filled with mystery.

Doubt is a part of life because there are more questions than answers, and when answers come, they often lead to new and deeper questions. How and why was the world made, if made is the right term? Why is human nature crossed by-perversity though it craves love? Why does righteous judgment often miscarry, not only when bad people succeed, but also because good intentions often seem thwarted or turn into evil? We say God's providence is evident in the beauty and order of nature; but when we see a cobra or tornado or ravaging flood, we are no longer sure of providence or order or beauty.

So, we can be honest with the atheist and admit that genuine doubt is a part of our lives too. Furthermore, doubt and skepticism can be very positive. Every major scientific advance has started with skepticism. Galileo was right when he called doubt the father of discovery.

2. Secondly and connected to this, we can go on to say to the atheist — "we've missed you; in fact, we need you." We need the genuine doubters and skeptics to keep us honest and to keep us on the search for truth. Too often in our pride we come to believe that we have all the truth. Someone has said that doubts are like the measles, health is served if they come out.

We need to recognize that atheistic or agnostic critics of religion make an important contribution to the religious communities. Their criticisms of what they understand to be the meaning of the historical religions are often valid. They represent a challenge to obscurantism often valid. and clericalism that is needed. They are often specialists in their concern for particular values which at any time the churches may neglect or even undermine. There is a stuffiness that comes over all religious bodies when they never have to face this kind of opposition or questioning.

So, we need to pay close attention to the opposition, to the skeptics and doubters; they help keep us honest and on the right track.

This means, however, that the atheist also needs us, particularly if we are not dogmatic and are open in our search for the truth. The doubters need to doubt their doubts and we can help them do that. While it's true that many believers in God are altogether too complacent, too rigid in our conclusions about life, the atheist can be as rigid in his or her conclusions as the believer. Too many of us, believers and atheists alike do not want the validity of our perceptions of reality to be questioned or tested. We often sit back and are assured of certain certainties that are not certainties at all.

We believers need the atheists, and they need us as well.

3. Thirdly, you can say to the atheist — let's talk about your outlook on life; let's talk about what you do believe, because everyone believes. What one believes is always a principle of judgment about the nature of reality. You can therefore say to the atheist; what's your overall outlook on life?

Harry Emerson Fosdick liked to say that "there are many ways in which Christianity can be described — in terms of its organizations, its theologies, its ethical principles--but it can be thought of also more simply as a way of looking at things."

Each one of us has an outlook on life. It may include God, or it may not. Christianity and its trust in a loving faithful God involve a changed point of view, a new outlook, an unaccustomed way of seeing things. The importance of this rests upon a basic principle. All of life consists of two elements; first, the facts; second, our way of looking at them, our perception, our interpretation.

Here, for example, is a person who has an irritating physical limitation. That is true of many individuals. If then a person has allowed it to hurt his or her temper, ruin the career, spoil one's work, how astonished that person may be reading the biography of Immanuel Kant, to discover that there is another way of looking at it.

Kant also had a distressing physical limitation, but he lived his life all the same and did his work. What he said was, "The oppression in my chest remained, for its cause. in the structure of my body, but I have become master of its influence on my thoughts and actions by turning my attention away from this feeling altogether, just as if it did not concern me." A person's way of looking at things, our perception, can make a profound difference in the way in which we live and behave.

So, Christianity, believing in the kind of God which Jesus revealed by his life, teachings, death and resurrection, is a way of seeing life, other people, and all of creation.

And that's what Jesus told people — he tried to help them change their way of looking at things. When a prospective follower came within range of Jesus Christ, he or she was not asked to join a church, or to subscribe to a formal creed. The person was asked to get a new way of seeing things — a new way of seeing the Sabbath, of seeing the Samaritans, of seeing sinners, children, enemies, God, and oneself. The word in the New Testament that is translated "repent" means literally "change your mind," change your way of looking at things. That's also what it means to be born again. It is to have a new way of seeing the world, a new way of seeing others, a new outlook on life and what's most important in one's life. This kind of conversion is always radical business.

It makes all the difference in the world. If for example, it is your practice to see all or most human beings as your potential enemy, as people who cannot be trusted, then you will behave one way towards people. If, on the other hand, you see all people as children of God, as being loved by God as you are, as persons who can be trusted and loved, as your friends, then you will treat people in another way. When a person becomes a Christian and sees God and others from a Christian point of view, it means we have to withdraw our previous ways of looking at persons and the world.

Thus, Jesus said, "you have heard that it was said of old, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy; but I say to you, love your enemies." Or take another example, "Get a new way of looking at money," said Jesus. "Take heed and keep yourselves from all covetousness; for a person's life does not consist in the abundance of things he or she owns or possesses. The world's way of looking at things is to get as much as possible and hold on to it." But Jesus said, "Learn to let go. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal."

So, we need to ask the atheist and ask ourselves — what is your way of looking at things in the world? What is most important? What is eternal?

To believe in God is to have a different outlook on such details as persons and money, and also a different outlook on the whole universe, on creation. To believe in God as Christ revealed God is to see creation not as a vast blind mechanism crashing ruthlessly but it is rather to see on, creation as being held by a purposeful God, with intelligent meaning and moral intent throughout.

To believe in God is to see creation in total, as connected, as working in harmony. Too often we see things only in bits and pieces and never put the whole picture together.

Take the ocean for example. To a chemist, it is H2O plus. To a fisherman it is a means of livelihood. To a poet it is the round ocean girdled with the sky. To the person who likes to sail, it is a place for recreation. But it will not do for any one of us to claim that our point of view exhausts the ocean. It does not. Neither will it do for anyone to claim that his or her point of view exhausts this vast and varied universe. The chemist is right, so is the geologist, so is the astronomer. But when all the sciences have contributed their material way of looking at the universe, that is not the whole of the universe either. It is greater than the sum of its parts.

So again, you can ask the atheist and ask yourself: what is your outlook on life and creation?

For those of us who believe in God as Christ revealed God, we have an outlook based on trust, a trust tha.t there is a meaning and purpose beyond all our fragmentary knowledge and purposes. Faith or trust in God means trust in life itself, despite the obvious patches of meaninglessness which sometimes drive us to the edge of despair.

Belief in God is more than belief in God. It is an attitude, a way of looking at all of life. So, you can ask the atheist, what is your way of looking at life, its origin, its purpose, your own destiny. What is your way of looking at people and at all things?

Each day we face this world. But our lives do not need to be what they were. We have only a limited control over facts and over many of the forces which surround us, but we have a very large control over our way of seeing them, over our attitude toward them. And when a person gets a new way of seeing, that person has a new life. To be carnally minded, physical and material minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Amen.