Sunday, June 23, 1991
WHAT CAN AN AGNOSTIC FIND IN OUR CHURCH? (NO. 6 IN A SERIES: SERMONS YOU'VE REQUESTED)
Matthew 7:15-23, 11:2-6

Suggestions for sermon topics are still coming in. For example, because of the recent United Presbyterian Church's discussion on sexual issues, someone last week requested that I do a sermon on the theme—"Churches Confront Sexual Issues." That was the headline of a feature story in the local newspaper a few weeks ago. Later in the summer or early fall, that will be the topic of a sermon.

Today, however, I want to deal with another sermon request. Someone asked for a sermon on the question: "What Can An Agnostic Find In Our Church?" It's a good and proper question. Some related questions are: is our kind of church only for true believers or one kind of believer? Can one be a doubter or skeptic and still be a faithful church member? Is there room in our kind of church for diversity of belief?

Let's begin with some definitions. What is an "agnostic?" An agnostic is one who disclaims any knowledge of God but does not deny the possibility of God's existence. To put it another way — an agnostic is an individual who says that he or she cannot know God in a personal way. Some synonyms for agnostic are skeptic, doubter, and questioner.

The opposite of agnostic is gnostic. Both words come from the Greek word "gnosis," which we translate in English as "knowledge." In the Greek language, "gnosis" was understood to be a particular kind of knowledge. We might describe it as intuitive knowledge or insight. It is to be distinguished from rational knowledge, or that which we know or experience through our five senses and through a reasoning process.

Historically, within the Christian faith, there have been individuals and groups of people who have been known as "gnostics." The gnostics emphasized intuitive knowledge or insight and knowledge of self. Furthermore, they believed that to know oneself is to know human nature and destiny and that to know oneself at the deepest level is simultaneously to know God.

For example, an ancient gnostic teacher said, "Abandon the search for God and the creation and other matters of similar sort. Look for God by taking yourself as the starting point. Learn who it is within you who makes everything his own and says, 'My God, my mind, my thought, my soul, my body.' Learn the sources of sorrow, joy, love, hate.... If you carefully examine these matters, you will find God in yourself." Thus, some of the early Christian gnostic teachers taught that Jesus, instead of coming to save us from sin, came as a guide who opens access to spiritual understanding. Then, when the disciple attains enlightenment, Jesus no longer serves as one's spiritual master: the two have become equal — even identical.

Early in the Christian church's history, gnosticism of this kind was considered heretical for a whole list of reasons, some political and some theological. The best book on the subject is one by Elaine Pagels, entitled The Gnostic Gospels. But that's the subject of another sermon. Today, we are not talking primarily about gnostics but agnostics.

I think we can all understand why some people think of themselves as agnostics. Hopefully, there is a bit of an agnostic or skeptic in all of us. It is a normal response to those who are always claiming absolute certainty of knowledge about God and other things as well. One of

the temptations of religion of any kind is a lust for certitude, and this lust can mislead us and others.

For some, the lust for certitude causes them to make the Bible into a visible external authority: an answer book without error. Then the Bible is made into something it was never meant to be.

Here's one example: the attempt to reconcile the creation stories in the book of Genesis with some of the modern theories of creation proposed by science by interpreting the six days of creation in Genesis as geological periods. This exchanges the religious meaning of the Biblical narrative for a collection of pseudo-facts.

To take the Bible seriously, but not literally, is not to discount its importance as the foundational document on which the church stands, but it does remove the idolatrous authority with which the Biblical words are sometimes stamped.

Such people become "gnostics" of another kind — gnostics of rational knowledge. They claim that they and they only know and can interpret the truth which the Bible reveals.

In understanding the Bible, here's an image that has been of great help to me. Think of the Bible as a lamp rather than a mirror. A mirror reflects reality as it is, and that kind of assertion underscores Biblical literalism. In contrast, a lamp gives light. It is directional. It illuminates as well as causes shadows. What we see and how we see it depends on where the lamp is located. And different people point the light in different directions. Thus, the Biblical writers were expressing the reality illuminated by their own interests and dispositions. The Apostle Paul used another helpful metaphor. He said, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." Too often, we try to make the treasure and the vessel the same, or we confuse the vessel with the treasure.

The lust for certitude causes some other people to join religious cults, which also promise to take away all uncertainty. In a cult, the leader knows all. He or she has secret knowledge. It's another form of gnosticism. The followers come to believe that God speaks the truth only through that leader and his or her visions and revelations. History is filled with sad stories of the destruction and tragedy which cults and their leaders have brought about.

Last week, I read the sad story of a cult leader in Africa. In 1856, a young woman was walking by a river near the Indian Ocean in Africa when she had a vision: "She was told that the people of her tribe should destroy all their cattle, cease cultivating their crops, and build new enclosures to receive new beasts which would miraculously appear. The dead would arise from their graves, and strong people would arrive in an army to drive white people into the sea." For some reason, the people believed in her vision. They killed their cattle; then they watched for the resurrection. Chiefs vied with each other to prove their orthodoxy by personally slaughtering their great herds. No resurrection. Forty thousand are thought to have died of starvation in the famine that followed. Desperate people ate horses and dogs. They ate their children. They ate each other and they attempted to eat grass.

Some agnostics and skeptics were needed among those people. However, it's not easy being an agnostic or skeptic in a crowd of true believers.

Now let's return to our original question: what can an agnostic find in our church?

The first answer is: other agnostics. In fact, I hope that each one of us has a little bit of agnosticism in us. Some will have more, others less. Where our religious faith is concerned, the lack of certitude about the nature of God can actually represent a healthy respect for the dangers of substituting human forms for Holy Substance. God can never be totally described or experienced by any one of us. There is always more to God than we can see or know. There is no one among us who has all the truth about God. The Bible tells us to "test the spirits to see whether they are of God." In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits." In other words, look not at what people say they are or what they say they believe, but look at how they live.
There are people who claim to be agnostics and at the same time live as decent, good people. Their personal lives exhibit all the Christian virtues — self-denial, generosity, hard work, integrity, moral rectitude. They are faithful spouses and loving, attentive parents. Their children are disciplined, courteous, sensitive to the feelings and needs of others, and are good students in school.

Secondly, not only can an agnostic find other agnostics in our church, but they can also discover here that Jesus never put down those with doubts and questions. Rather, he affirmed them. Jesus accepts our agnosticism in the same way as he accepted the agnosticism of people in his own time.
There's a story in the Gospel of Matthew about John the Baptist, who, when in prison for his preaching, began to have doubts as to whether or not Jesus was chosen of God. John the Baptist had been his advance agent, and now he was having second thoughts. "Have I been mistaken?" "Have I put my faith in the wrong person?" In an attempt to quiet his doubts, John sent some of his followers to ask Jesus again, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Jesus received John's questions and took them seriously. He did not think any less of him because of his doubts. Rather, Jesus said, "Go and tell John what you hear and see — the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them."

Jesus was saying that the way to deal with doubt and uncertainty is to be open to the activity of God that is present in the world. Jesus was also saying to John that there was no way in which he could absolutely prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that he was the Messiah. Faith, in the last analysis, is a basic trust in God and in reality that goes beyond facts or proof. However, faith is not blind belief either. Remember, Jesus said, "Go and tell John what you hear and see." Faith is an openness to mystery. Faith acknowledges the fact that we cannot know it all — that we can never be completely certain.

All this is very different from the claim that religion provides us with a set of absolute certainties concerning God, human beings, and the overall meaning of life. An insistence upon absolute certitude misconceives religion and distorts it. Religion is a search for meaning, rather than a certitude. In this kind of church, we invite the agnostics, skeptics, and cynics to join us in this search. I believe that we can demonstrate by attitude, word, and action that the church is not as irrelevant and self-serving as it sometimes appears to be.

Thirdly, as an agnostic, you will find in this church an openness to new knowledge and experience. We are not afraid of what Biblical scholars have discovered or might discover in the future. We are not afraid of what scientists tell us. We are not afraid to look through the telescopes and microscopes and to learn more about the universe. As people in the Reformed

tradition of the Christian faith, we believe that God's truth is continually breaking forth. We believe that God continues to be revealed in new ways.
Both agnostics and gnostics need what the church provides at the center of its life — the regular worship of God. The church is the one and only institution in our society that keeps reminding us of the spiritual and transcendent dimension in all of life. Our Christian faith keeps telling us that there's more to life than the physical, more to life than what we see, more to life than the here and now, more to life than the material world which we deal with every day. There is a spiritual and divine dimension within and throughout all of life.

We need to be continually reminded of this because it's so easy to get bogged down with the everyday problems we face, and we can lose all sense of perspective. The regular gathering together to worship God helps us to see creation as a whole, to lift us above the immediate. It reminds us of our connection and relation with all of creation, and we get a glimpse of life from an eternal perspective.

We also believe that you will find in this church and others like it a loving, forgiving, accepting community of people who are ready to help you in your troubles and celebrate with you in your joys. That's why we have inscribed above the main front doors of this church the words of Jesus, "Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." We believe that we can come to know and experience the love of God in our lives as we love one another. Amen.