Sunday, August 7, 1994
CONVERSATION WITH AN ATHEIST
Luke 11:9-13

Every now and then, I meet individuals who tell me that they do not believe in God. They claim to be atheists. Some people who make this statement have experienced an awful tragedy and are angry with all of life. Others are bitter and unforgiving because of an experience that caused them deep pain years ago. Still, others who say they don't believe in God have been brought up with an outlook on life that is based on the pursuit of success, defined in terms of things that can be seen and possessed. Anything spiritual is beyond their understanding.

They want to believe that only materials that can be known by the five senses are real or worth working for, and the things of the spirit are neglected or thought to be false and misleading.

In addition, there are some who claim not to believe in God who are, in reality, discarding their inadequate childhood concept of God and have not yet found a mature understanding of God to take its place. Their god is too small. Many years ago, J.B. Phillips, a British Biblical Scholar, wrote a classic little book called Your God Is Too Small. I continue to recommend that book to those who want to enlarge their idea of God.

There are also those who consider themselves atheists as a result of sincere doubting and searching, and they are still on their search. In reality, they tend to be agnostic rather than atheistic.

I've also met people who have been turned off by the institutional church or have been deeply hurt by the church and are therefore turned off by the idea of believing in God.

Some people, too, have come into close contact with others who claim to be firm believers in God and intimate with God, and they come to the conclusion that if that's what a "believer in God" is like, they want no part of it. Unfortunately, there are persons who claim to believe in God yet show more bigotry and hate than unbelievers.

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 one can be argued into believing. Rather, listen carefully to the person who says they don't believe in God. Hear their story. Try to understand their doubts or their pain. Pay close attention. Listen actively.

Perhaps you have read Bertrand Russell's essay on "Why I Am Not a Christian." He was sincere in his belief, but it remains a belief. Remember, just as much faith is necessary to be an unbeliever as it is to be a believer.

Second, 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, is subject to many of the same distortions and mistakes as other human institutions. In fact, sometimes the institutional church can even make worse mistakes than other institutions because it wants to believe a religious organization is protected from errors.

Third, you can ask the non-believer in God what kind of God they do not believe in. In my experience, frequently, a person who claims to be an atheist is rejecting an inadequate or false concept of God, the kind of God you don't believe in either. And you can say that.

In addition to these tactical suggestions, there are some other approaches and connections with the atheist or non-believer that can speak to them on a deeper level.

First, you can acknowledge your kinship with them. You might say, for example, "I know somewhat what you are feeling because I've had a similar experience. Faith is always in tension with doubt."

Almost all people have sincere doubts from time to time. That kind of doubt is always a part of the search for truth. Genuine doubt is the reverse side of genuine faith. Doubt in God means we are taking God seriously — it's a wrestling with God.

Just as genuine faith is more than intellectual assent — it is a deep trust in ultimate reality — so genuine doubt is the fear that evil and despair may have the last word. Doubt comes to us because many times, from our perspective, we experience life as being unfair. Tragedies and evil take place 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 did the universe we live in come into existence? Why is human nature often perverse even though it craves love? Why does righteous judgment often miscarry, not only when bad people succeed but also when good intentions frequently seem thwarted or turn into evil intentions?

We like to say that God's providence is evident in the beauty and order of nature, but when we see a tornado, a hurricane, or a raging 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 human advance has begun with skepticism. Galileo was right when he called doubt the "father of discovery."

Secondly, we can go on to say to the atheist — we need you. We need genuine doubters and skeptics to keep us honest and to keep us on the search for truth. We need those who say, "The emperor has no clothes." Too often, in our pride, we come to believe that we have all the truth.

We need to admit that atheistic or agnostic critics of religion can make an important contribution to our religious communities. There is a stuffiness and a self-righteousness that can come over religious bodies when they never have to face honest questioning and the continuing search for truth.

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

But the reverse is also true. The atheist also needs us, particularly if we are not dogmatic and judgmental and are open and loving.

Doubters need to doubt their doubts, and we can help them do that. In the same way that some believers in God are too complacent, too dogmatic, and too rigid in their conclusions about life, the atheist can be as rigid in their 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.

Thirdly, you can say to the atheist — let's talk about your outlook on life; let's talk about what you believe because everyone believes. We all have basic assumptions on which we base our lives. What one believes is always a matter of judgment about the nature of reality. As I said earlier, just as much faith is necessary to be an unbeliever as it is to be a believer. You can therefore ask the atheist, "What's your overall outlook on life?"

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

Each one of us has an outlook on life. It may include God or not. Some people say it includes God, but if you look at the way they live their lives, it does not indicate a firm belief in God.

The Christian faith and its trust in a loving, faithful God involve a changed point of view, a new 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 an individual who has a physical limitation that is irritating. That is true of many people. If then, a person has allowed it to hurt their temper, ruin a career, and spoil their work, how astonished that person may be in 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 lies in the structure of my body, and 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." The limitation remained, but 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, 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 or understanding the Sabbath, of seeing the Samaritans or other traditional enemies, a new way of seeing sinners, children, God, and oneself. In fact, the early followers of Jesus were called "Followers of the Way."

The word in the New Testament, which is often translated into English as "repent," means literally "change your mind," change your way of looking at things. That's what it means to be born again. It is to have a new way of seeing the world, a new way of seeing other people, a new outlook on life and what's important in one's life.

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 toward others. 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 potential friends, then you will treat others in a different way. When a person becomes a Christian and sees God and others from a Christian point of view, it means we have to withdraw or change 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 beware of 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. Learn to give. 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 consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.”

So you need to ask the atheist, and you need to ask yourself, what is your way or my way of looking at things and people in the world? What is most important? What is eternal?

To believe in God is to have a new and different outlook on such things as persons and money and also a different outlook on all of creation. To believe in God as Jesus revealed God is to see the creation not as a vast blind mechanism crashing ruthlessly on with no overall purpose or direction, but rather as being held by a purposeful God, infused with God’s loving energy, with intelligent meaning and moral intent.

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

Take the ocean as an example. To a chemist, it is H20 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. Neither will it do for anyone to claim that his or her point of view exhausts this vast and varied creation.

The chemist is right, so is the geologist, so is the astronomer. But when all the sciences have contributed their way of looking at the universe, that is not the whole of it either. It is greater than the sum of its parts.

So again, you can ask the atheist, “What is your outlook on life?”

For those of us who believe in God as Jesus revealed God, we have an outlook based on trust, a trust that 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.

Each day we face this world. But our lives do not need to be what they were. We have only 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, and it can be a life of joy and peace. Amen.