

# Sermon, 6 Easter A

Acts 17:22-31, John 14:15-21 & 1 Peter 3:13-22  
Preached Sunday, April 27, 2008 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

Once upon a time, on a beautiful, sunny day, an atheist was out on a lake, enjoying a relaxing day of fishing. All of a sudden, in the midst of this placid scene, the man was terrified to see the Loch Ness monster rise up from depths and attack him. The atheist was thrown from his boat and landed helplessly in the water. As the Loch Ness monster swam toward him — his huge jaws aimed squarely at the man's head — he cried out, "God help me!" Instantly, everything froze in time and a booming voice rang out from the heavens, "I thought you didn't believe in Me!" The man yelled back, "O great Creator, please cut me some slack.... Until a minute ago, I didn't believe in the Loch Ness monster, either!"\*

*(Pause...)*

It would be great fun to imagine the rest of the story. How would our gracious and merciful God respond to the newly-converted, former atheist? And how would God handle that pesky and intimidating Loch Ness monster?

One element of this little story is, of course, pure myth. We have no confirmed evidence of an actual creature that matches the reported sightings of "Nessie." But the other character, the atheist, is quite real. And he has a lot more company today than he did some years ago. If you took all belief systems and ranked them, from the greatest number of followers to the least, non-believers in our country are now # 3 position, with Protestants 1st and Catholics 2nd.\*\* You may have noticed that agnostics and atheists are growing in numbers as well as in media attention and influence. Closer to home, we all probably know people who identify themselves as non-believers. Today, there simply isn't the stigma attached to agnosticism and atheism that there used to be, not very long ago.

I was reflecting recently on this phenomenon and — as often happens — along came our set of Sunday readings to give me some perspective. All three of them contain wisdom for us as we try to make sense of this new development.

In the Gospel, we hear Jesus remind us that faith is an experience of the Spirit. Belief begins when we become aware of God's Spirit encountering our own spirit. Jesus says, "This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you" (John 14:17). If we accept this at face value, we should not be surprised that there are vast numbers of people who do not acknowledge the Divine. They simply haven't recognized the invitation to become friends with God, through the Spirit.

To use the words of Jesus, a person cannot know divine truth until he or she welcomes the divine Spirit. When that Spirit begins to abide with us, it's as if a secret door suddenly springs open. We then discover this other realm — a realm that the rest of the world does

not know and cannot fathom. So, when agnostics and atheists say they cannot believe, they're using the only type of knowledge available to them, which is intellectual reason. But Jesus implies that reason alone is not enough to bring us to faith. That's the work of the Holy Spirit — which cannot be perceived solely by our mental faculties. You can see why so many great Christian writers have referred to faith as a "leap." To come to belief in God, we have to leap from the familiar territory of human reason into the mysterious realm of the spirit. And some people simply will not go there.

In this passage from John, Jesus also says that the life of faith is about love. His followers, he says, "are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them" (v. 21). Atheists are fond of saying that there is no conclusive, irrefutable evidence that God exists. And, from the standpoint of human reason and the scientific method, they're right. Because faith is largely about the spirit, we're barking up the wrong tree when we try to offer material proof that God exists. (By the same token, atheists are also barking up the wrong tree when they try to prove the opposite.)

But if you want to have some fun with atheists, ask them if they've ever loved another person. Assuming they say "yes," then ask them to prove it. Using a scientific standard of evidence, there is no way to prove that one person loves another beyond the shadow of a doubt. That's simply not the nature of love — which is something we feel and grasp intuitively. And the same is true of faith. We know it when we encounter and experience it. Until then, we might as well be talking about another galaxy.

This is something I learned the hard way. Although I grew up as a believer and was religiously active, I fell away from faith in college. This happened when I decided that I would test the truth of Christianity from an academic and intellectual vantage point. I suspended my long-held beliefs, stopped practicing my faith, and began taking courses in philosophy and religion with titles like "Religious and Anti-Religious Thinkers." After reading the likes of Socrates, Plato, Augustine, Freud, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Feuerbach, I was more mixed up and confused than ever. What I finally learned is that beliefs which are not lived, experienced and practiced can't really be called "faith" the way Jesus describes it. But what it also means is that we need to have some degree of sympathy for those who haven't been exposed to the realm of the spirit — and therefore can't begin to fathom what it's all about.

This brings us to our second reading, from the First Letter of Peter: "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (3:15).

This extraordinary passage makes two implicit demands on believers. The first is to exhibit the kind of hope that comes from a vibrant faith. We live in a world that is literally dying for a glimpse of genuine faith, love and hope. If we don't share the hope that we've been given through grace, the unbelieving world won't know anything about it. The second demand is to be willing to account for this hope.

This might sound intimidating, but it need not be. It can be as simple as saying, “I have hope because I believe that the love of God is real and always available to everyone.”

There is also a third demand that comes at the end of this verse, in which the author counsels us to account for our faith “with gentleness and reverence” (v. 16). In the Adult Forum last week, we heard about a new crop of atheists who are openly hostile to religious belief and the concept of God. Among those who’ve written best-selling books, there is no reverence and very little gentleness in evidence. If we who are believers cannot account for our faith and hope in a gracious spirit, we probably shouldn’t even try.

In closing, I want to turn to the first reading from Acts. There, we have this extraordinary passage in which Paul addresses non-Christians in Athens — that ancient center of intellectual wisdom in the Greek world. Notice how Paul approaches them — not only with gentleness and reverence, but also with respect for their pagan beliefs. Instead of trying to tear down and belittle them, he makes his case using their own language and thought systems, even quoting their own philosophers. Noticing the shrines and temples to their many pagan deities, he compliments them for being “extremely religious.” Apparently, the pagans in Athens were so concerned about excluding and offending some forgotten deity, they erected a shrine to “an unknown god.” Paul sees this as a golden opportunity to proclaim the living God they have not known — a god not made with human hands, the one God who made heaven and earth, the God who longs for the redemption and well-being of all people, the God of Jesus, the Messiah.

A biblical scholar said this about Paul’s approach to the people of Athens:

“Their religious yearning ... is the inarticulate and uninformed yearning of the pagan for the God whom only the Scriptures can disclose.... Paul might say [about modern-day pagans and unbelievers] ... that at least they are searching. They at least know that something else is needed to make sense out of life, to give coherence to the world. The church, rather than standing back from pagan religiosity, pointing our fingers in righteous indignation, should, like Paul in Athens, minister to their searching.”\*\*\*

That, my friends, is something we all have in common — believers, unbelievers and agnostics alike. There is something about the human spirit which yearns for communion with something or someone beyond the limits of what we can think or see or control. And those of us who have begun to know the Source and Author of Communion need to share the hope and love that is in us.

If not us, then who? If not now, then when?

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\*Adapted from a story in *Bits & Pieces*, July 17, 1997, p. 9. \*\*Diana Eck, *A New Religious America*, (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001). \*\*\*William H. Willimon, *Acts in The Interpretation Series* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 143.